WELLBEING • MINDFULNESS • CREATIVITY • ESCAPING

Breathe

and make time for yourself

ISSUE 53
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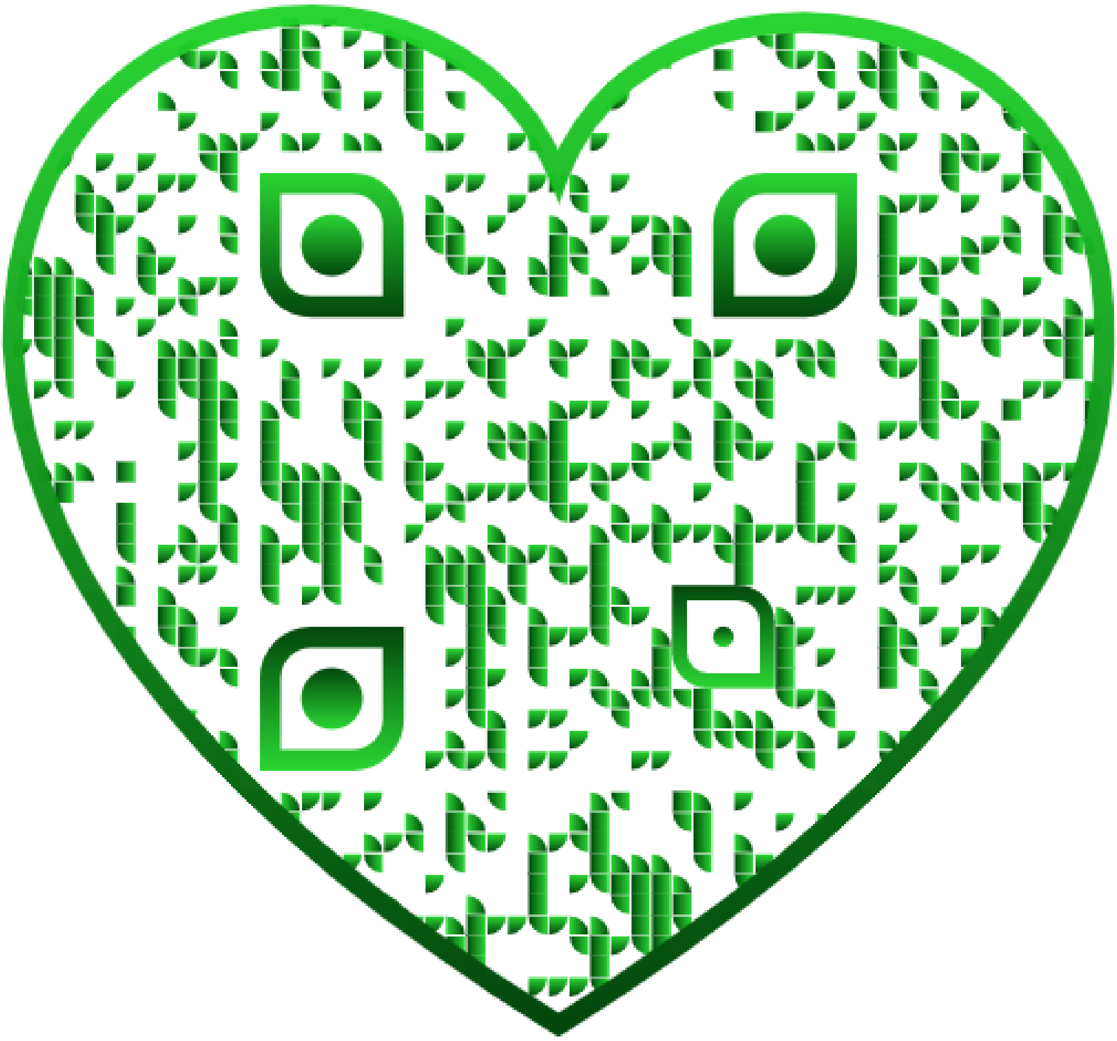

WELCOME

Sometimes subtly, like water over stone. Sometimes all at once, like thunder. This is how identity forms. Through stories told again and again, our sense of self begins to take shape.

Some arrive as throwaway remarks or light-hearted tales shared at family dinners – a nickname, a birth story, a passing comment from a teacher or friend. Others settle in more slowly – the labels we're given, the roles we're handed, the expectations that shape how we move through the world. Each one leaves a mark.

You were the easy child. The anxious one. The wild one. The caretaker. The accident. The miracle. The afterthought. The light.

These fragments, whether offered in jest or wrapped in tenderness, often take hold long before we have the language to sift truth from myth. We absorb them as instruction – how to act, what to tone down, which parts of ourselves feel safest to show. How we accept love.

Over time, something shifts. A tension builds. An ache that the story we've been handed is half-finished. That we've outgrown it or were never truly the protagonist to begin with.

What then?

It takes patience to trace the old lines. And clarity to ask: Is this still true? Did it ever fit? You may never rewrite the beginning, but you can revisit the tone. You can choose which details to hold close, and which to let go.

Identity is never fixed. It drifts and reshapes – in conversation, in reflection, in the choices made when no one's watching.

You're allowed to question what you've been told. You're allowed to change the narrative. The pen is already in your hand.

Edit with intention. Cross out the lines that were never written for you. Replace inherited dialogue with your own voice. Annotate the past. Change the tense. Let the plot twist. Write in contradictions, they belong there too.

And if the arc feels uncertain – if you don't know what's next – remember this: the ink is still wet.

Madi

COVER ARTIST

Working from the south of France, Nicolas Aqo creates digital art that captures moments of serenity, inspired by the soft light and poetic stillness of nature, architecture, and everyday beauty. You can find more of Nicolas's work at **nicolasaqo.com**

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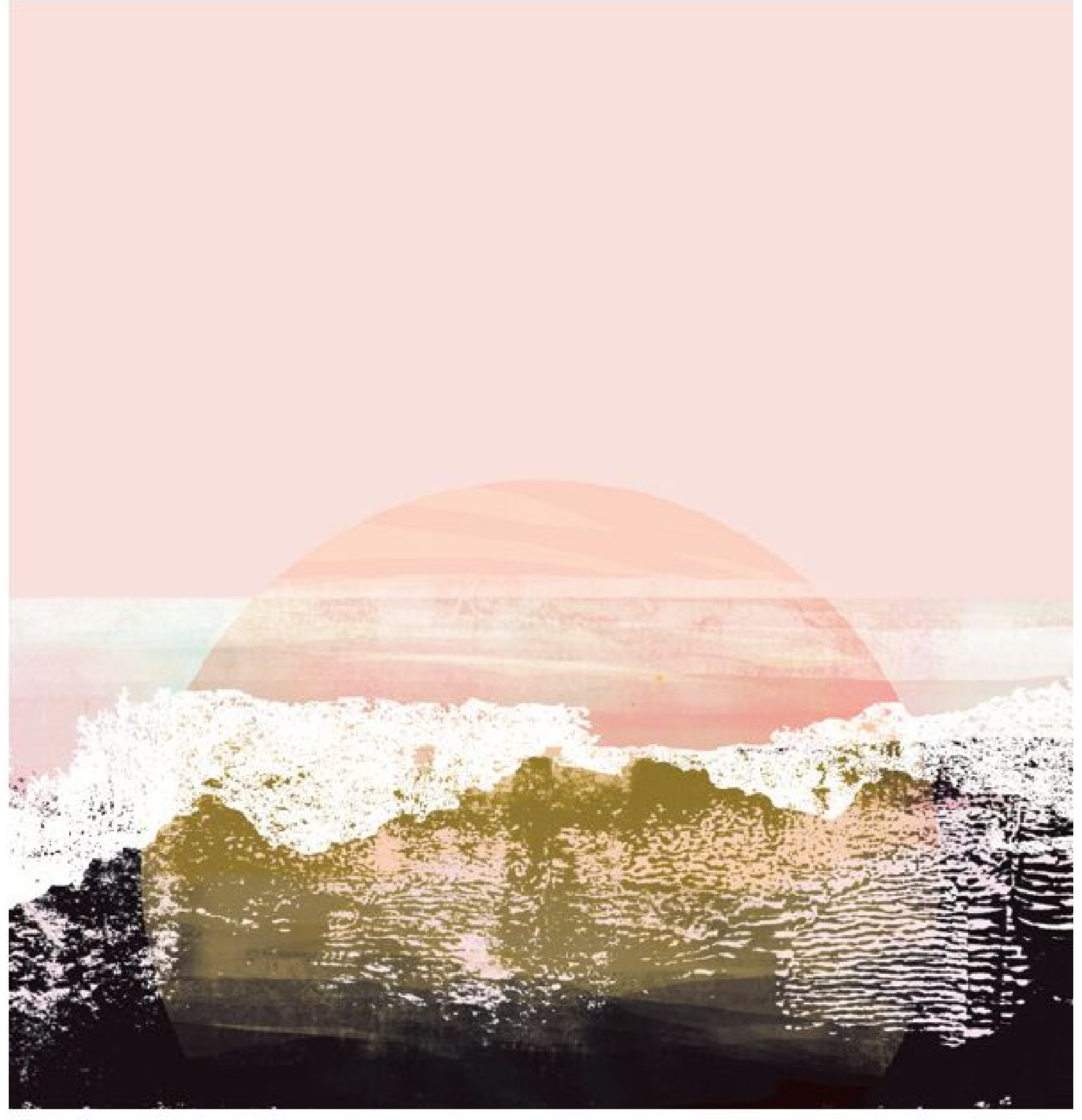

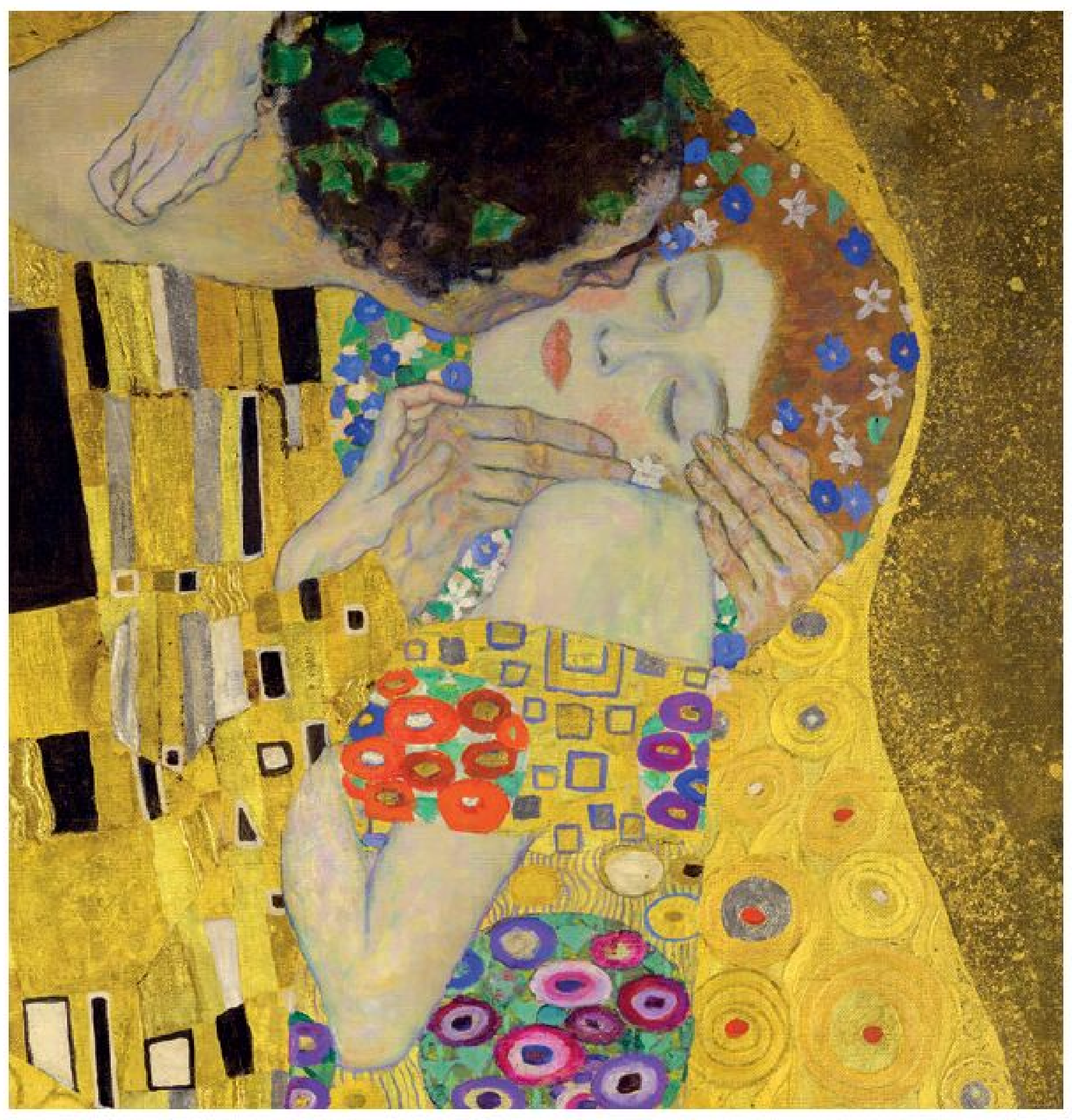

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WELLBEING

‘You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream’

Les Brown

A LEAP OF yes

What might happen if you opened yourself a little more – to new directions, unexpected adventures, or long-held dreams?

Novelist Clarice Lispector once wrote: ‘Everything in the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born.’ Saying yes more could help you lean into fresh opportunities and discover previously unknown experiences. But it’s important to make your yeses considered, rather than just agreeing to everything.

Small yeses can grow

In June 2015, a group of 19 strangers responded to a Facebook invitation to go camping in a field outside London. The invite was posted by Dave Cornthwaite, who went on to establish the YesTribe, a community that grew out of that trip and became an organisation that helps people meet up for new experiences. It revolves around the motto ‘SayYesMore’, which is also the name of Dave’s not-for-profit social enterprise. With more than 80 volunteers, it brings people together to learn, encourage each other, and share stories. Dave even stages an annual Yestival, which attracts hundreds of people to take part in workshops and listen to motivational speakers. ‘The last time you did something new was the last time you grew as a person,’ says Dave, whose yeses have taken him on adventures all over the world. ‘There’s so much power in saying yes to new experiences; comfort kills ambition. If you’re thinking that maybe you could do with some new experiences, just give it a go. If you try something and you don’t like it, then you can always go home, knowing at least you gave it a go, but remember that, sometimes, discomfort is just growing pains.’

Dave’s own story began almost two decades ago, when he woke up on his 25th birthday depressed and without direction. Feeling there must be more to life, he made ‘Say yes more’ into a personal motto. His first big adventure was skateboarding across Australia, but he says that small-scale yeses can also change lives: ‘Maybe you want to start a cupcake business or spend a night sleeping in a hammock under the stars. You could plot a line on a map from your own front door and spend the day cycling along it and have a totally different experience.’

Start with no

It might sound counterintuitive, but creating space to say yes to what you really want often starts with saying no to things that don’t light you up. After all, you only have 24 hours in a day, seven days in a week, and 12 months in a year, so you can’t possibly say yes to everything. The aim is to create a balance and make your yeses more discerning. Jennifer Bailey is a life coach from Michigan, US, whose podcast *Love Your Life + Law of Attraction* looks at how focusing thoughts and energy towards what you want can lead to greater levels of joy, love, happiness, appreciation, and empowerment. ‘Saying yes really does start with learning how to say no,’ says Jennifer. ‘Learning how to say no to the things you don’t want to do, or don’t have time for, opens you up for a yes to things that spark your interest or that big juicy adventure.’

Jennifer says that some people feel they have to say yes to ‘every ask or task’, even if it leaves them feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, or depleted. She explains: ‘Get good at saying no, without feeling guilty or having to justify or rationalise your decision. After all, saying no to something is really just a roundabout way of saying yes to something else.’ For example, refusing to swap a shift could give you more quality time with your family, saying no to an unwanted errand could mean you can say yes to dinner with a friend, and turning down a new job with a long commute could give you scope to sign up to an evening art or language class. There are no right or wrong ways to divide your time – but striking the right balance helps you say yes to the opportunities that are perfect for you, rather than to things you feel you “should” or “have to” do.

> ‘Step through new doors. The majority of the time there’s something fantastic on the other side’
>
> OPRAH WINFREY

Say a discerning yes

Saying no more creates space to dream big or take those things you've been wanting for a long time off the back burner. When life is busy and you have a full diary or long list of commitments, it is sometimes hard to see the forest for the trees and figure out what you really want, which is why working out what you don't want can be a good place to start. 'When you're overloaded you can't dream big,' says Jennifer. 'It's much easier to work out what you really want to say yes to when you're not leaking energy throughout your day.' She gives the example of a person who harbours a secret desire to go hiking in Peru, but has dismissed the dream as something they will never have the time or resources for. One morning, they're standing in a queue at a coffee shop and they're so wrapped up in thoughts of their busy life and seemingly endless to-do list that they don't even see the man standing in the queue in front of them, let alone strike up a conversation. But if they'd been more open to chatting, they would have discovered that he'd just returned from hiking the Inca Trail and could have given them some tips to start making their dream a reality.

Give energy to what you want

Yes and no are just words – it's the thoughts and feelings behind them that give them meaning. If saying yes to something makes you feel empowered, excited, or energised, then that's the energy you will project out into the world and draw back to you. But if saying yes makes you feel overloaded, stressed, or resentful, then that negative energy can be a vital clue that perhaps it should have been a no.

> If saying yes to something makes you feel empowered, excited, or energised, then that's the energy you will project out into the world and draw back to you

'Pay attention to how you feel when you say yes,' says Jennifer. 'You deserve to experience joy, love, freedom, and positive experiences. Say yes to the things that give you those feelings.' The right yeses may give you a feeling of ease, as if everything is falling into place, or a spark of excitement that makes you smile on the inside.

Pay attention to your dreams

If you're still not sure what you want to say yes to, try looking at the things you've put on the back burner. These might be goals or hobbies you've been thinking about or hankering after for years but have never given time to because you've written them off as impossible dreams. 'When you give yourself the space, the yeses are always there,' says Jennifer. 'They may just be soft voice whispers at first, but if you listen to them, they will get louder. People can be so busy they miss the breadcrumb trails.'

This year, try saying a few more discerning yeses, and see where they take you.

Words: **Jade Beecroft**

MOVE TOWARDS THE AFFIRMATIVE

- **Take ownership of your time.** Remind yourself that every item on your calendar or diary is something that you've said yes to. If you're feeling overwhelmed, look at your schedule and see if there are things you could say no to instead.

- **Create space to dream.** If you're not sure what you really want, give yourself the head space to figure it out. Be aware of how you feel when considering your decisions – will this yes light you up?

- **Look at what's on the back burner.** If you've been discounting or denying yourself your dreams for a long time, try taking them off the back burner and giving them room to grow and develop. What first steps can you take towards making them a reality?

- **Imagine the possibilities.** When weighing up whether to lean into a new experience or opportunity, ask yourself what's the best thing that could happen if you said yes.

- **Don't be afraid to fail.** Remind yourself that not everything works out and try not to be disappointed if you attempt something and it doesn't go according to plan. The more you succeed, fail, and learn, the better you get at saying yes to the things that are right for you.

How the story goes

What we're told about our conception and birth can impact the narratives of our life

Stories – the ones we are told and the ones that are created around us – have a powerful effect on the shape of our own narratives. By reflecting past experiences and relationships, whether with family or friends, stories play an important role in constructing our identities and helping us to understand who we are and our place in the world.

Over time, research has shown that, in many cases, people tend to live up to perceptions and expectations. Continually telling a young person that they'll never amount to anything, for example, can destroy confidence to the extent that it ends up becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Conversely, someone who's praised for always being polite or pleasant may take these descriptions and characteristics on as part of their identity and continue to "be" those things.

Back to the beginning

But what about our first stories – those surrounding our conception and birth? Can what we know or what we are told about these early experiences have a bearing on how we view ourselves, the world, and our place within it? My mother has always delighted in sharing my own birth story with me. After having a healthy boy – my big brother – she experienced multiple miscarriages and was told she was unlikely to be able to carry a girl, so when I was eventually conceived, little thought was given to a female name. My mother went into labour with me during what was then, as she likes to tell me, Australia's hottest day on record, and I arrived in the early hours of the following morning. And then she was told that I was a girl. 'Oh no!' is what she's always said she exclaimed – although remaining playfully unclear about whether this was an exclamation of surprise, joy, and disbelief, or of horror and disappointment.

Difficult starts

This playfulness – the laughter with which my story has always been communicated, the mock fist-shaking, the fact that my brother was confused about the men in uniforms who came to collect my mother and, thinking that she was being arrested, hit one of them in the legs and shouted 'Don't you dare take my mummy to prison!' – is one of the factors, according to a study led by professor Jane Ogden, that can have an impact on self-perception. According to the research, conducted by the University of Surrey, where Jane is a professor of health psychology, those whose birth stories include an element of difficulty feel lucky and have an appreciation of life, as long as the story is delivered with humour. 'How a story is told is key to how it is received, as the feelings and emotions of the storyteller can be mirrored by the listener,' says Jane.

This certainly resonates with me. I tend to relish life and to find humour or bright sides in most of my misfortunes, such as they are. I love and feel loved, and small things make me happy. Nevertheless, I would never have thought to connect this approach to life with my entry into the world.

Jane says that the idea for the study came about after a conversation with one of her students, who revealed that she'd been conceived via IVF and that this had always made her feel lucky and appreciated; that her parents really wanted and were grateful for her. 'And then a colleague mentioned that he'd always been told that he was "too lazy" to come out of the boot, and had emerged from the sunroof instead. We got talking about how interesting it is that everyone has a birth story, and how it gets integrated into who you are.'

Guilt from the outset

Children often internalise guilt in subtle ways, especially when parents unintentionally frame their early years – or even their birth – as difficult or traumatic. Hearing that one's arrival into the world brought distress rather than delight can leave a lasting emotional imprint. In everyday life, it's not uncommon to see how people apologise for simply taking up space or causing minor inconvenience. How much deeper might those feelings run if someone believes their very existence was once experienced as a burden by the people they first loved?

One participant in Jane's study described 'a stressful journey, embroiled with difficulties with her heart, liver, and spleen' that left her with a negative impression: 'I think, growing up, there was a level of pressure I put on myself because I was told I was this amazing case, that I actually had to make something out of my life. And I think I had that even as a younger kid – that I had to do something or help my parents, not be a pain to my parents because I was such a burden when I was born.'

Miracle of existence

According to psychologist and media commentator Sandra Wheatley, such information can be difficult to listen to and rise above but, as she points out, there is something inherently positive about birth stories. 'If we were talking about, for example, blood loss in the context of a car accident, it would be in quite a different way,' she says, 'but having babies, from the outset, isn't straightforward and birth in itself is a triumph – so there's generally a "but look how well it turned out" tagline to every difficult story.'

In fact, she says, most good stories – and, indeed, everyday life – are based on opposing forces: good and bad, hero and villain, struggle and triumph. 'Conception may be difficult, pregnancy may be difficult, and birth may be difficult, so the arrival of a baby combines that mixture of struggle and hardship on the one hand, but success and ultimate triumph on the other – and I think that one just needs to choose what to emphasise.'

Quizzing others in my (45+) age group about their knowledge of how they came into the world revealed that women, overwhelmingly, knew more about the circumstances of their births than similarly aged men did. Might this be down to the fact that mothers tend to communicate such things to daughters more than they do to their sons, with the expectation that this information will be relevant to them, as potential mothers, in the future?

Gender differences

'It may well be that, in previous generations, there was a sense that birth was a topic about women, for women,' agrees Sandra. 'Men didn't tend to be present for the arrival of their children. But I think that, as time goes on, this mentality is changing and, like most things in society, narratives around birth and the way they are communicated will evolve. As fathers become more present and involved in the process of birth, they are likely to show more interest in the topic – and who better to tell you than your own parents?'

The passing down of wisdom, from the women of one generation to the next, has significant historical and cultural relevance, too. Traditionally, childbirth was something that women both experienced and, in their role as midwives, officiated over. That began to change in the 1700s, however, as obstetricians, who were predominantly men, began to take over senior responsibility for childbirth from midwives. 'There is something about birth, and the sharing of stories about birth, that creates something of a Russian-doll moment,' says Sandra. 'There's a comfort in that; in being one more person who is doing something that many, many people have done before, something that your own existence is proof of.'

Altered narrative

And, it seems, the fact of existence is something that can transcend whatever negative impressions someone may have of their own arrival into the world. Being here, being in the world, is the triumph that makes every story of hardship a positive one. If humour and affection are lacking from the story you've been told about your birth, then it's still within your power to reframe the narrative. Humour, says Sandra, is the first step. Even if your story, or those of your predecessors, has not been relayed with laughter or joy, it's possible to tell it in a different way to yourself, and to others. 'Being in the world is its own success story,' she says. 'The fact that we're alive means that, ultimately, things must have gone well, because we are here, not only to reflect on those things, but also to decide to look for the positive and to acknowledge that the positive outweighs whatever negatives we've been told about. You can also choose to shift the focus. So, rather than viewing a difficult birth as something to feel guilty about, you could look at it as something to feel grateful for: "Yes, it was hard and, yes, my mother experienced pain, but between the two of us, we made it."'

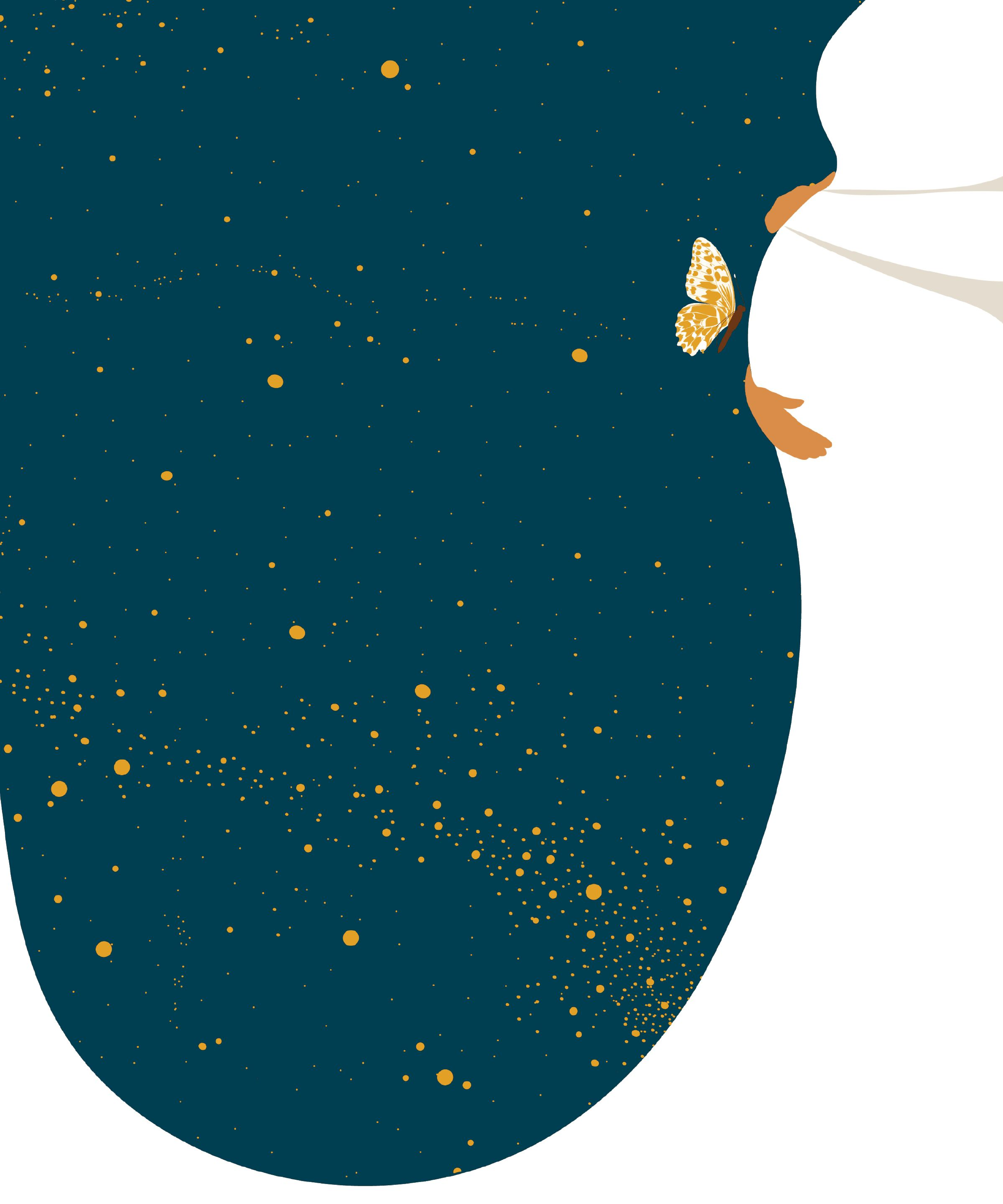
Words: **Sarah Rodrigues**

DIFFERENT PATHS

What if you know nothing about the circumstances of your birth? For some people, information about their arrival into the world might be scarce or completely absent. If you were adopted or your birth has just never been spoken about, how might this affect your sense of self?

According to Sandra: 'We take whatever information we have and weave our own birth story. It doesn't need to be the actual, physical moment of birth. It could be about your position in the family or your earliest recollections of family life, the dynamic you were born into, or even the place of your birth.'

And again, she points out, while the findings of Jane's research demonstrate that stories of a difficult delivery can spark feelings of appreciation for life when told with humour, 'the mere fact of having been conceived and born – whether you know about the circumstances surrounding those events or not – is something for which we can feel appreciative.'



PRESENT THOUGHTS

A well-chosen gift can be an act of love, a reflection of memory, or a gesture that says more than words

Whether you're hoping to lift a loved one's spirits, mark a shared moment, or celebrate someone's small joys, the right gift can deepen a bond and be remembered for years. But when it misses the mark, the disappointment can linger – if only as a gentle reminder of misaligned intentions. So how can you tell what makes a gift feel right? And how does psychology help guide those choices?

Unwrapping the psychology

To understand how to choose a gift that resonates, it helps to look at why humans give in the first place. According to neuropsychologist Rachel Taylor, Founder of *The UnBroken Podcast*, the act of giving is deeply rooted in our need to connect: 'A huge part of giving is all about social bonding ... the more we have social bonding, the more successful we are at survival at the most fundamental of levels.'

This social bonding isn't just emotional, it's neurological. Studies have found that giving to others activates the brain's reward centres, prompting the release of dopamine, the same chemical linked to feelings of happiness and motivation.

Beyond connection, gifts can signal the strength of a relationship. Consultant psychologist Elena Touroni explains that a thoughtfully chosen present increases a person's 'perception of commitment' – showing time and effort have gone into selecting something that reflects them. When someone feels seen, heard, and genuinely considered, trust is often strengthened in return.

Tying up the emotions

Gifts often carry more than material value – they can reflect shared history, mark milestones, or express understanding. A handmade photo calendar, a well-worn recipe passed between generations, or a favourite book with an inscription – it's these personal touches that linger in memory.

This isn't accidental. 'A good gift is all about evoking certain emotions,' says Rachel. 'The limbic system [the emotional centre of the brain] links memories with emotion, so in order to appreciate [the gift] more, it's useful to think about what emotions you want to generate, and what memories can be used to trigger these emotions.'

It's this link between memory and emotion that helps make a small token – a note, a keepsake, a simple memento – so powerful. More than the item itself, what stays with the recipient is how it made them feel.

Finding the meaning

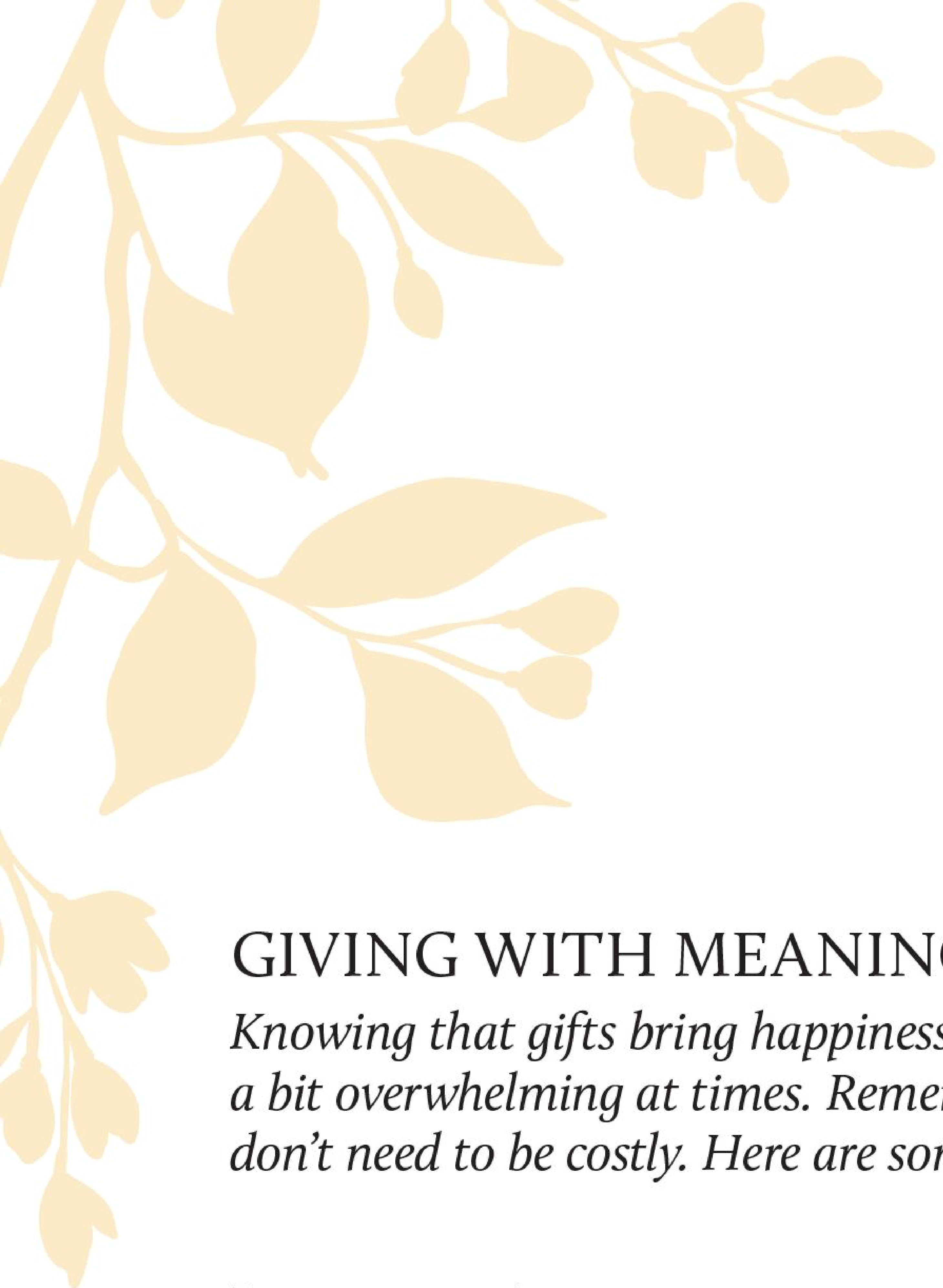
Sometimes, the most meaningful gifts are those that symbolise a moment, place, or feeling shared. A pendant etched with a botanical motif might speak of time spent in the garden. A discarded shell picked up from a beach walk, or a family heirloom, can carry deep memories. Objects like these become vessels for connection – physical reminders of something less tangible.

'Be guided by the emotion you want to elicit in the other person,' says Rachel. 'This is an enriching practice for both giver and receiver. Careful planning on what's suitable – and who we want to appreciate it – is as good for us as it is for those we gift to.'

And it's not just the receiver who benefits. Studies show that people who give gifts or spend money on others experience heightened wellbeing – even physiological benefits like lower blood pressure. When generosity is genuine, everyone feels the reward.

A present thought

The most meaningful gifts often carry a trace of the giver and a deep understanding of the recipient. They don't need to be grand or expensive – just thoughtful. When gifts hold a memory, symbol, or shared experience, they become something lasting. A reminder that we are known. And in the end, that's what gives it value.



GIVING WITH MEANING

Knowing that gifts bring happiness and strengthen bonds is wonderful – though it can feel a bit overwhelming at times. Remember, there's a wide world of gifts to explore, and they don't need to be costly. Here are some thoughtful ideas from Rachel and Elena.

Focus on experiences

From tickets to a live music gig or a cooking class, giving an experience – especially one shared together – creates moments you can both look back on with a smile. Rachel explains these gifts often leave a lasting impression because they build memories. *Breathe* reader Delia shares how a concert with her dad became a treasured occasion, especially since he can't get out much anymore. Elena adds, 'It's important to ask yourself, "What would truly bring this person joy?"' She also warns against choosing gifts based on what you'd like rather than what the other person really wants.

Think about humour

A playful gift can be a hit, but if it misses the mark, it might cause awkwardness. Elena suggests considering how much the recipient appreciates humour day to day – and remembering it's a very personal thing. She advises keeping light-hearted gifts for people you know well, and steering clear of anything that might touch on sensitive spots. Sometimes a joke is better shared in person than wrapped up.

Consider the cost

Money can make gift-giving tricky. Elena recommends reflecting on what you normally spend with that person and keeping it in balance. Both experts agree that emotion, personal taste, and shared memories often matter more than price. A costly present can sometimes feel like a token rather than a true reflection of care – imagine receiving an expensive bottle of champagne if you don't drink, for example.

Remember their tastes

People's style shows in everything from their clothes to their homewares and garden. When a gift suits their preferences, it's more likely to be cherished and used. Rachel says, 'Use what you know,' rather than taking a gamble on something too bold or unfamiliar. If they love blue or mid-century-modern style, look for those details when choosing a gift.

Wrap it up

How a gift looks matters too. Rachel points out that we're visual beings, and a little thoughtful wrapping can make a big difference. Choosing eco-friendly paper or adding a personal tag can show you care for both the person and the planet. Also think about when and where you give the gift – sometimes a quiet moment between just the two of you helps the meaning truly land.

Words: **Hope Talbot**

STILL UNSURE?

Before you buy or make something, ask yourself:

- What makes this person unique? Do they have a hobby or passion they'd love to explore more?
- Have they gone through changes recently that a thoughtful gift could acknowledge?
- How do they spend their days? What might add a little ease or joy to their routine?
- What do you value most about your relationship? Is there something that celebrates that connection?
- How do they like to unwind? Could your gift encourage them to take a little time for themselves?

Your day, your way

Get creative with how you'd spend your best 24 hours

For the late US singer-songwriter, Lou Reed, it involved drinking sangria in the park, feeding animals in the zoo, and catching a movie – but what would your perfect day look like? It might seem like an easy question, but whittling down what would make up the absolute best day is no easy feat. Happily, however, it's an enjoyable one, especially if you explore the options through creative writing. In fact, describing in detail the images, smells, sounds, and textures that would feature can bring your vision to life and even mimic the feelings that would flow from them. As you write about your perfect day, you can gain clarity on what you'd like to happen and, according to research, perhaps even prime your subconscious mind into actualising it.

The results of a 2009 study at Washington University suggest that the imagination plays a role in creating reality. As part of their research, psychology professor Richard Abrams and doctoral student Christopher Davoli asked a group of students to scan randomly scattered letters of the alphabet on a display monitor, and to press a button as soon as they'd located specific letters. As part of the exercise, they were told to imagine themselves with both hands behind their backs or around the display monitor in front of them, without actually assuming either position. Those who did the former were slower at searching for letters than those who imagined the latter. As reported by the university's online newsroom, the researchers concluded that 'the imagination has the extraordinary capacity to shape reality… This is the first study suggesting that merely imagining something close to our hands will cause us to pay more attention to it.'

Following this lead, taking time to plot your future seems a great way to exercise your imagination. That said, it isn't always easy, so if you're struggling to get started, we've put together a few exercises (see opposite and overleaf) to help inspire your perfect day. And whatever you choose to do, have a great time.

Words: **Kate Orson**

WRITE FROM THE START

These exercises and questions will help in the initial scene-setting for your day. Just as a novelist might lay out different aspects of a plot before beginning to write, sketch out some aspects of your day. If you feel stumped by a question or it doesn't resonate, move on to the next one. They're just prompts for inspiration. Jump ahead, skip, move back and forth, and fill in details as they come to you.

Freewriting brainstorm (10 minutes)

To start, pick up a pen and write down anything you would love to happen on your perfect day. A day at the spa, time at the beach, or doing a job you love. What would feature in your top 10? Jump from thought to thought without censoring or judging your choices. This is key to letting your subconscious express all your wishes and goals, perhaps even ones you haven't considered before. Don't worry if it seems like too much to cram into a single day, just see where your mind leads. The fine-tuning can come later.

Main character (7 minutes)

Obviously, it's you! But what version of you will it be, and when does this perfect day take place? Will it be next week, next year, or 10 years from now? How old will you be? If your perfect day is set in the future, will you have changed as a person or still be pretty much the same? Which aspects of you as a person, your work, family, or life will have changed? What remains the same?

Other major characters (5–7 minutes)

Is anyone else around on your perfect day? Is it someone you already know, or someone you've yet to meet? If it's a new person, you could expand on their character. Describe what they look like, as well as their personality traits. Consider their strengths and weaknesses, too, which can help to make them more rounded. Of course, you might prefer to spend the day alone. It's your day, so it's your choice.

Setting the scene (7 minutes)

A scene sets the tone and atmosphere for a piece of writing. Where will your perfect day take place? Will it be at one location, or a series of different places? Brainstorm the options. Write down a list of favourite places, including ones you've visited, as well as those where you'd love to spend some time. Don't worry about choosing just yet. For now, let your imagination go wild.

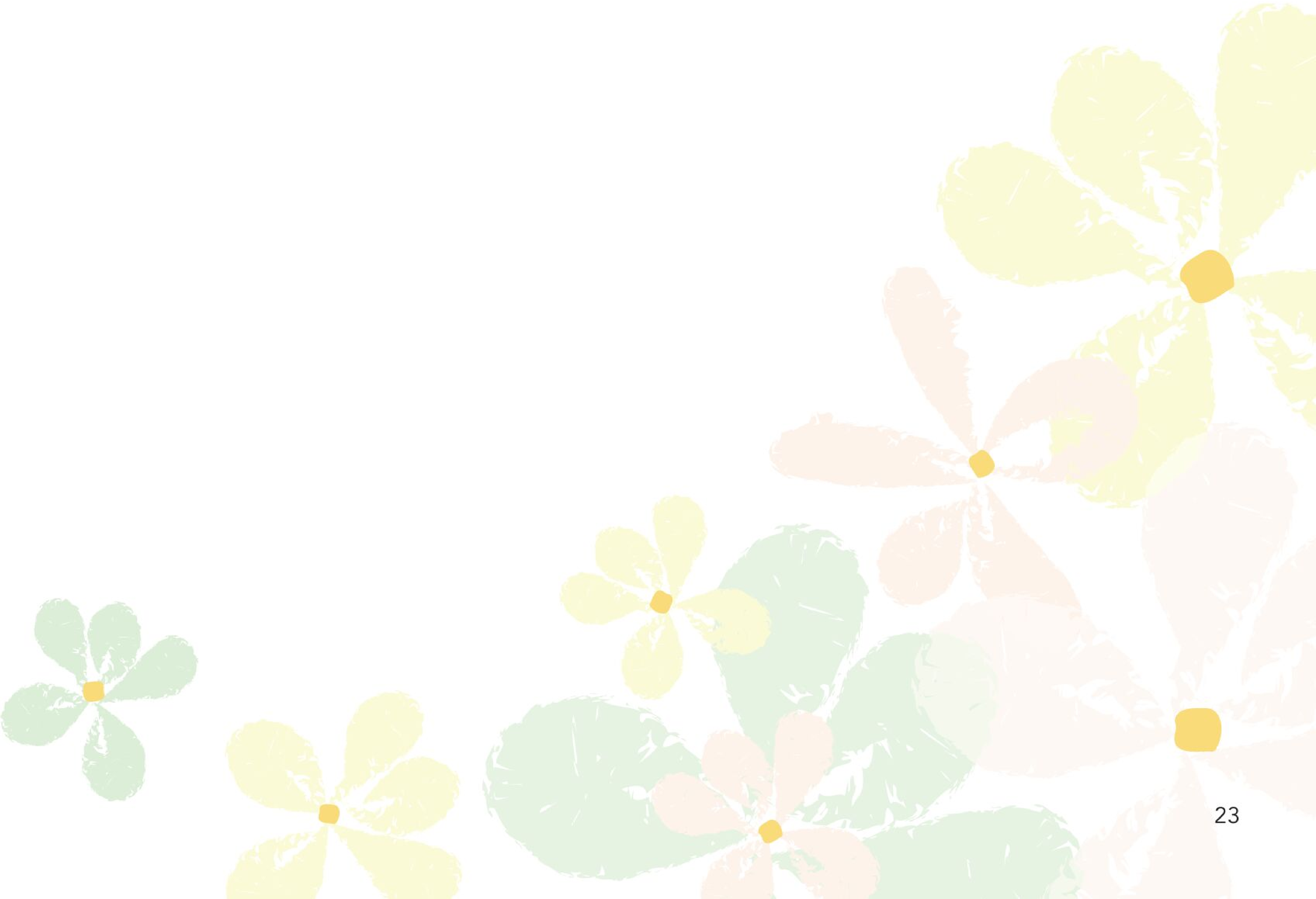
Once you've completed your list, choose the locations that will feature in your perfect day. Write a brief one- or two-sentence description of each location. What sights, sounds, and smells are evident? What's the weather like? Are there any other details you'd like to include?

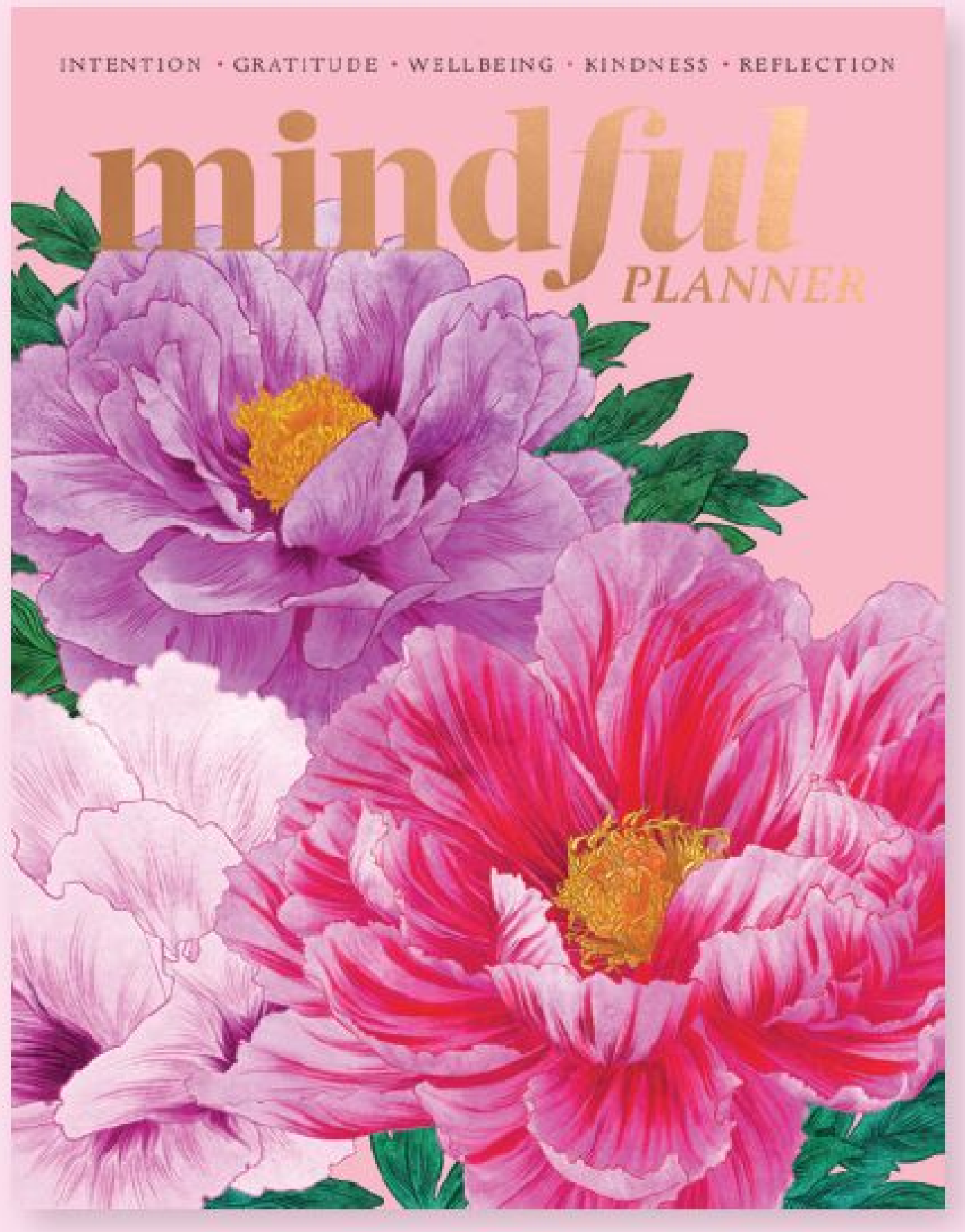
Day sketch (7 minutes)

Outline an hour-by-hour account of your day, and what you will do. Write it down as briefly as possible (the details can be fleshed out in the next part). Look back at your previous exercises and decide when you and any other characters enter the action and the place/s that form the backdrop to the events.

Writing your day (15–20 minutes)

Now's the time to begin writing your perfect day. Take it slowly and savour each moment, from waking up to falling asleep. How does the day begin? Notice the details, whether it's the texture of the bed linen, the view from the window, or the taste of a morning beverage. As you write, incorporate as many of the senses as possible. This will bring the words to life. As your imaginary day continues, you might choose to stick to your plan or to tweak it. One of the joys of writing is letting go of control and seeing where your pen leads you.

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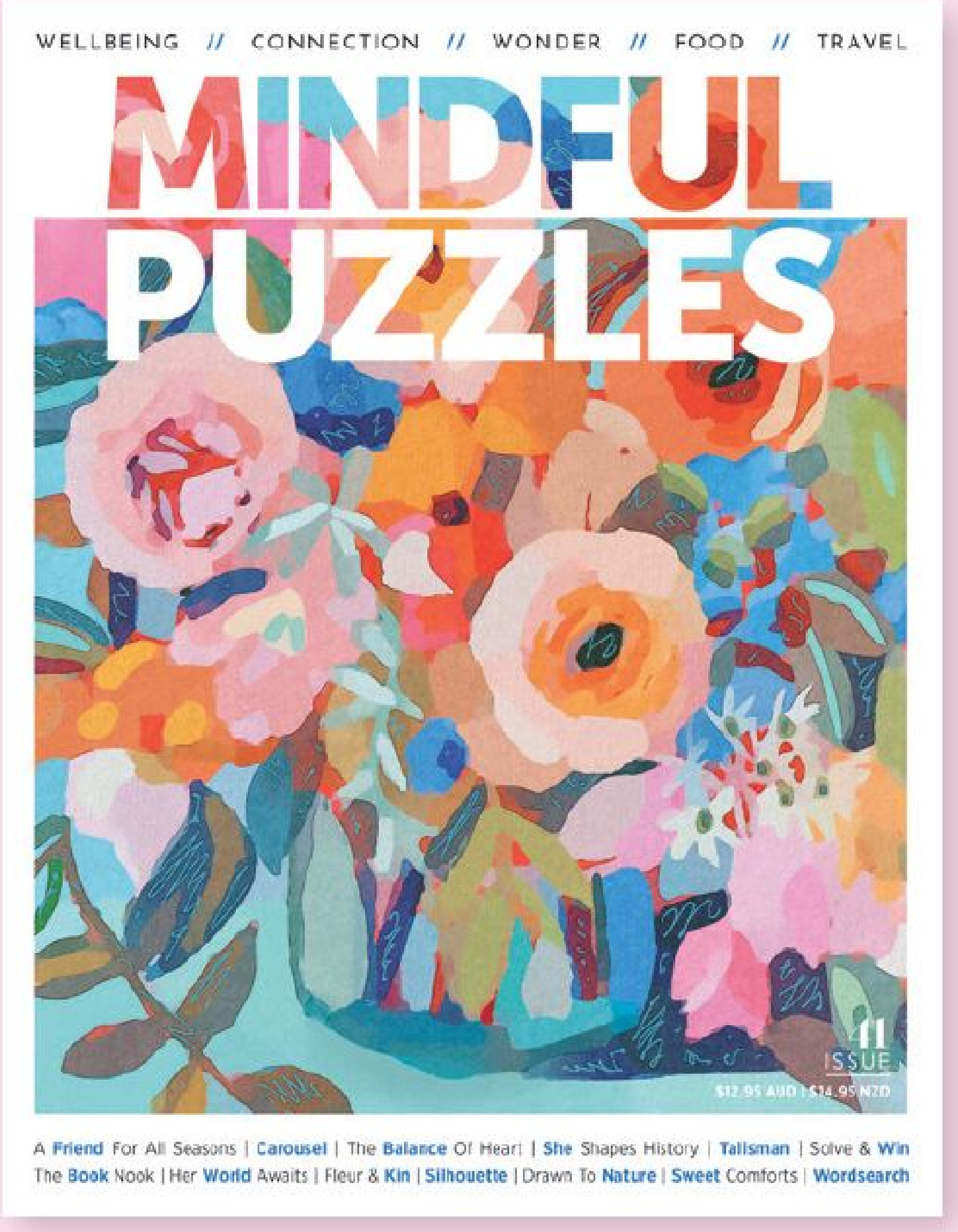
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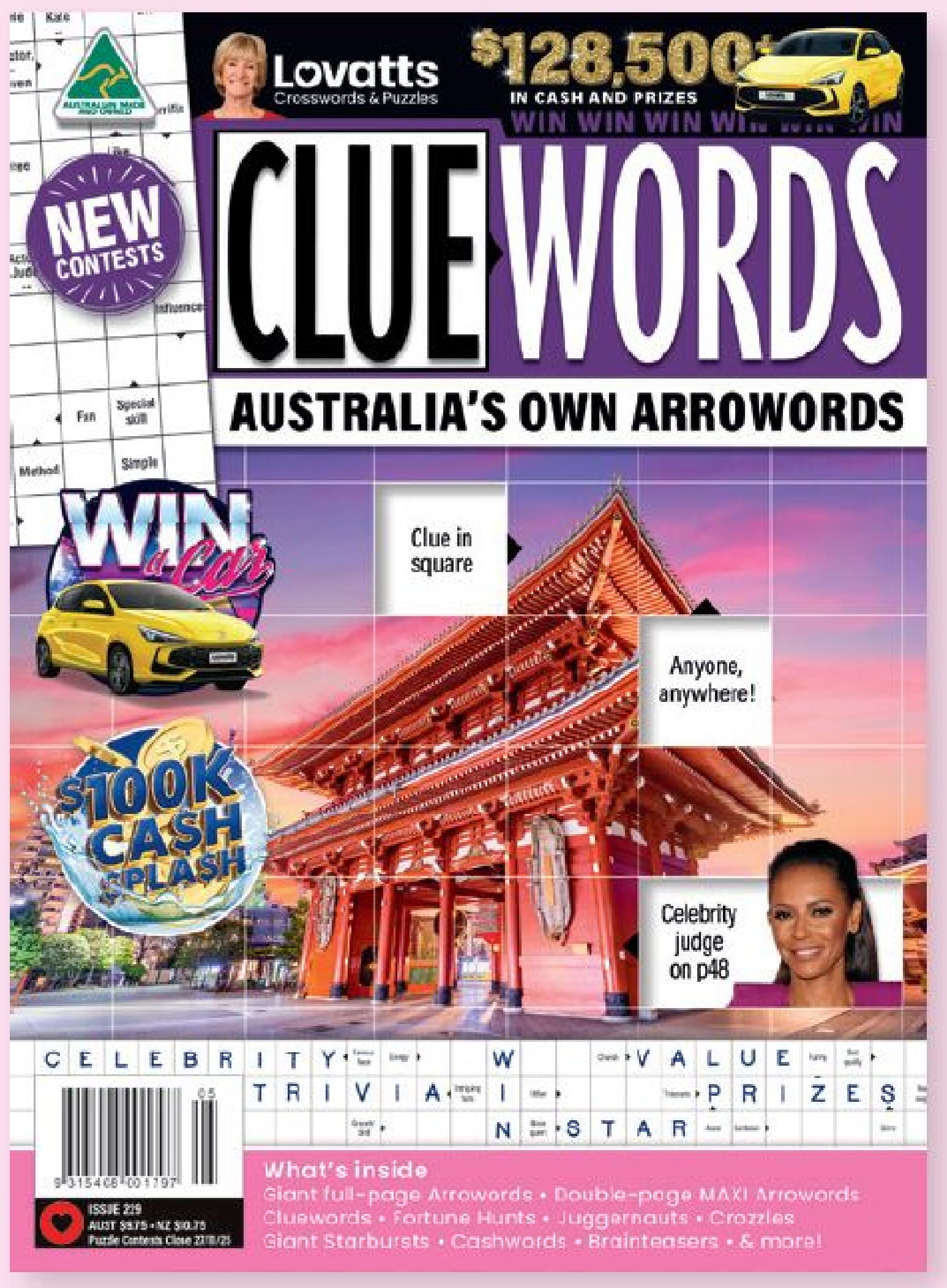
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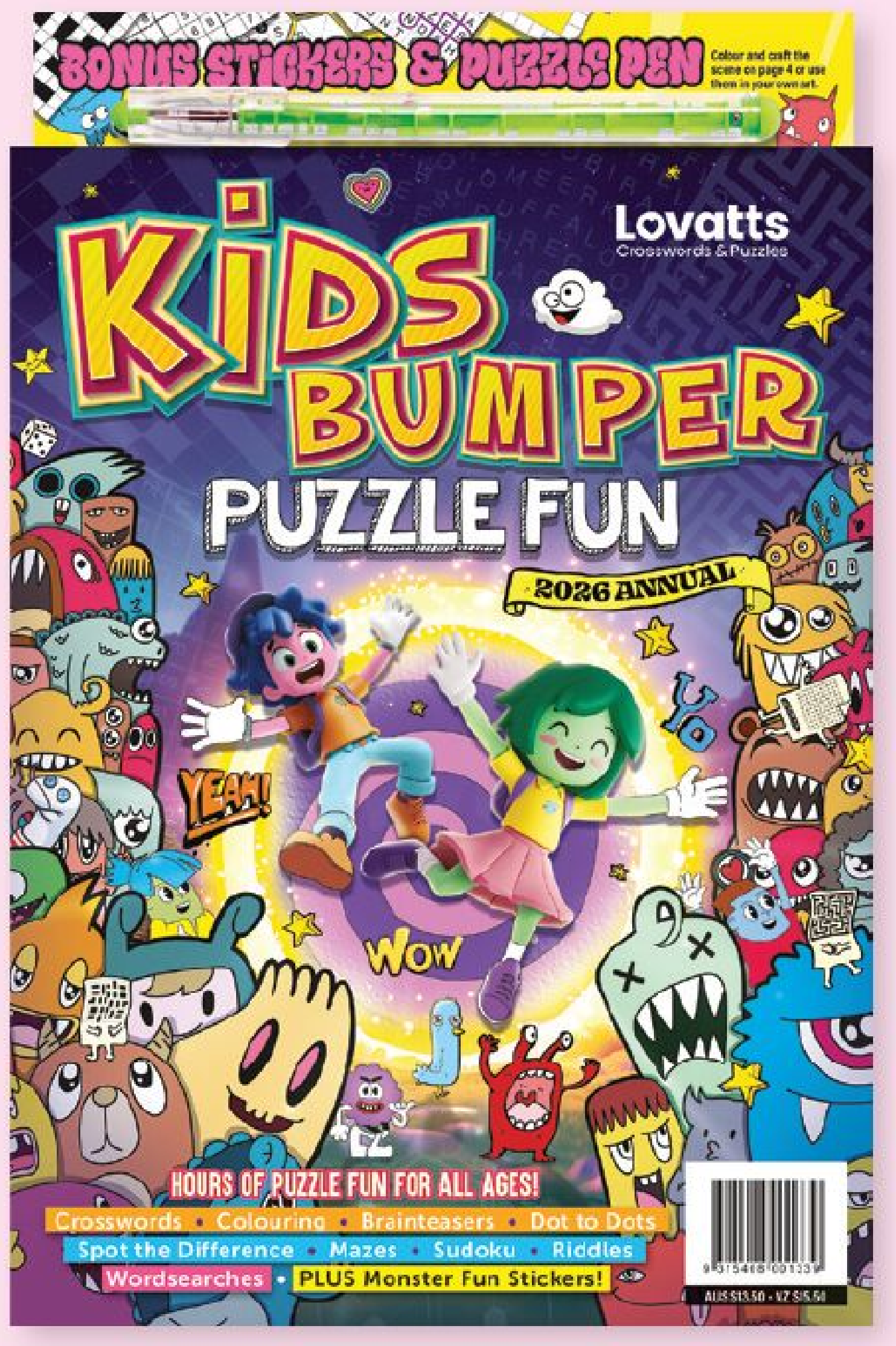
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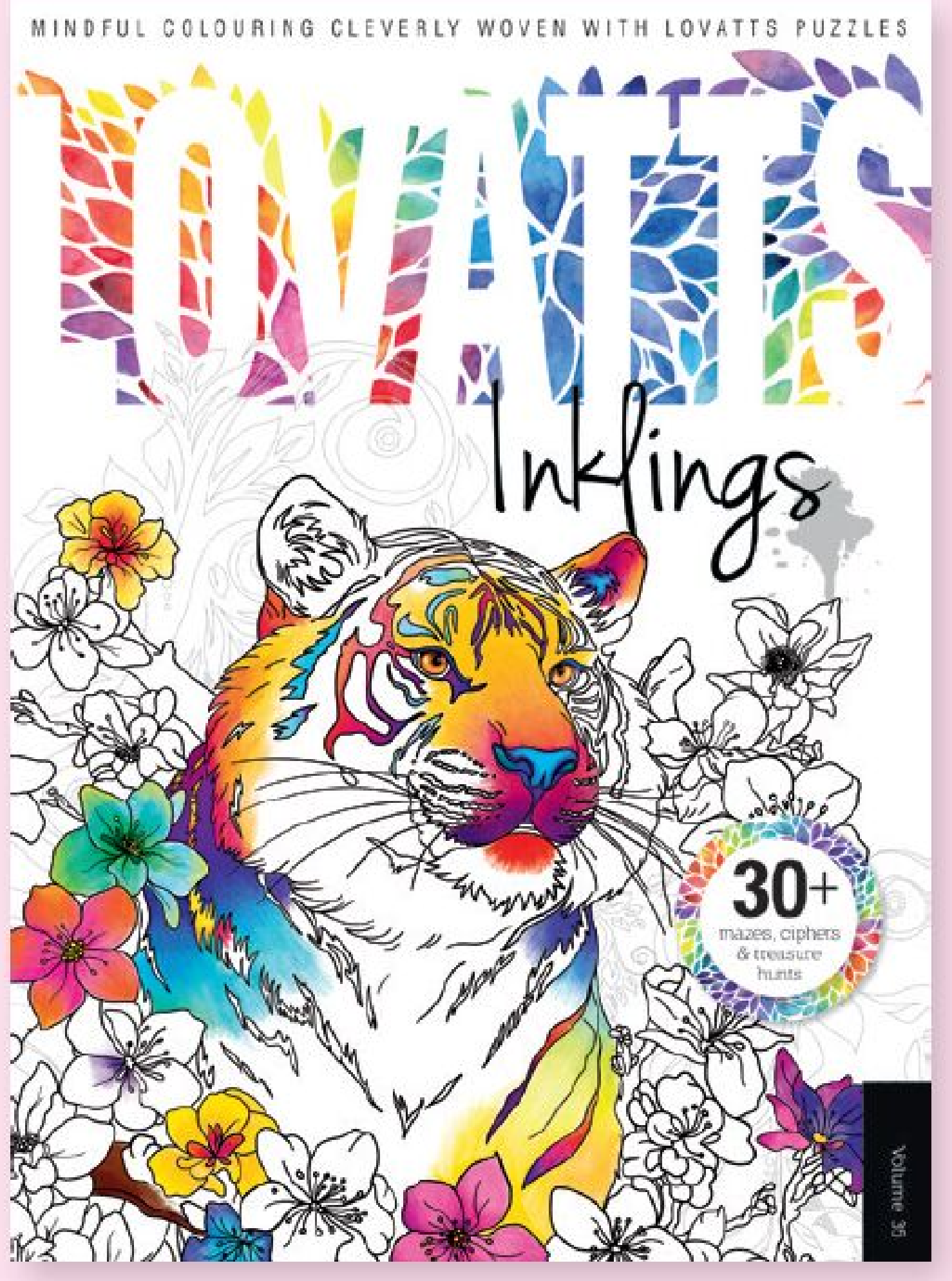
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LIVING

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Dalai Lama

Zest for life

From fresh salads to sweet endings, these lemon-filled recipes bring a little Italian sunshine to the table

LEMON POSSETS IN LEMON BOATS

SERVES 8

When you are lucky enough to have beautiful, leafy lemons, there is no nicer thing than halving them, scooping out the flesh (to squeeze) and filling them with lemon posset. The flavour of the rind perfumes the posset and provides a perfect picturesque vessel. You will need to scoop out four whole lemons, to create the "boats" this is served in, but you only use the juice of two, so the pulp from the others can be used in another recipe.

- 90 ml (generous ⅓ cup) lemon juice (I use 2 large lemons)
- 400 ml (generous 1½ cups) double (heavy) cream
- 90 g (½ cup minus 1 tablespoon) sugar
- 8 hollowed-out lemon halves, to serve

1. Combine the cream and sugar in a saucepan and bring to a low boil. Stir gently (the cream will expand a lot) and continue to cook for a minute or two, making sure the sugar has dissolved.
2. Remove from the heat and allow to cool for a few minutes. Add the lemon juice to the cream mixture, then decant into your lemon boats. (Note: the boats need to be on a flat surface so the liquid doesn't spill.) Chill in the refrigerator for at least 2 hours, or overnight.

FETA, LEMON, & MELON SALAD

SERVES 2 AS A MAIN OR 4 AS A
STARTER/SIDE SALAD

All members of the same family, these high-summer vegetables make happy bedfellows on the plate. Cucumbers come from the same genus as melons, and the two are often paired in salads or cold soups, whereas zucchini hail from a different family branch (along with squash) and make a welcome addition. Sweet, juicy, and nutty on the palate, the vegetables are offset by plenty of lemon dressing, some toasty pumpkin seeds, and salty feta. A perfect summer medley. I like to finish with lemon squiggles (a technical term!) for both aesthetics and a proper hit of zesty flavour.

- 50 g pumpkin seeds
- 1 small ripe melon (rockmelon is good, as is a large wedge of watermelon)
- 2 cucumbers
- 2 zucchini
- juice of 1 lemon
- a handful of lamb's lettuce or rocket (optional)
- a few sprigs of mint, leaves chopped
- 1 block of feta (or roughly 80 g goat's cheese)
- sea salt
- extra virgin olive oil
- lemon zest squiggles, to serve

1. Toast the pumpkin seeds in a dry frying pan (skillet) over a low heat for a few minutes until they pop and brown slightly.
2. Skin the melon, deseed, and cut into slices. Peel the cucumbers and cut into thick discs, along with the zucchini.
3. Place the vegetables and salad leaves, if using, in a bowl and toss with plenty of lemon juice and olive oil and a few pinches of salt. Taste and adjust the seasoning.
4. Stir the mint through the salad leaves, then place on a platter or in a serving bowl and scatter over the pumpkin seeds. Crumble over the feta, add another drizzle of oil and the lemon squiggles and serve.

CREAMY LEMON LINGUINE

SERVES 2, GENEROUSLY

A simplified version of one of my most frequently made recipes, which in turn was based on a most beloved Nigella Lawson recipe. The original recipe uses double (heavy) cream, but I use mascarpone as it is easier to get hold of in Italy and works perfectly here. I have never met a creamy lemon pasta dish that I didn't like.

- **200 g linguine**
- **2 egg yolks**
- **100 g (½ cup) mascarpone**
- **2 tablespoons grated pecorino**
- **zest of 1 lemon and juice of ½**
- **30 g (2 tablespoons) butter**
- **sea salt**
- **a few basil leaves, torn**
- **extra virgin olive oil, to serve**

1. Cook the pasta in a large saucepan of well-salted boiling water until al dente. Drain the pasta, reserving a little of the cooking water just in case the sauce needs it. Return the pasta to the pan.
2. Meanwhile, mix together the egg yolks, mascarpone, pecorino, and lemon zest, and juice in a bowl. Add a pinch of salt and the butter and set aside.
3. Throw the sauce into the pan of drained pasta and stir vigorously, over the lowest heat, tossing the linguine well until every strand is coated and saucy. Taste for seasoning, adding more salt or lemon juice if you see fit. Add the torn basil leaves, stir quickly, and serve with a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil if you like.

LEMON PANNA COTTA WITH STRAWBERRIES

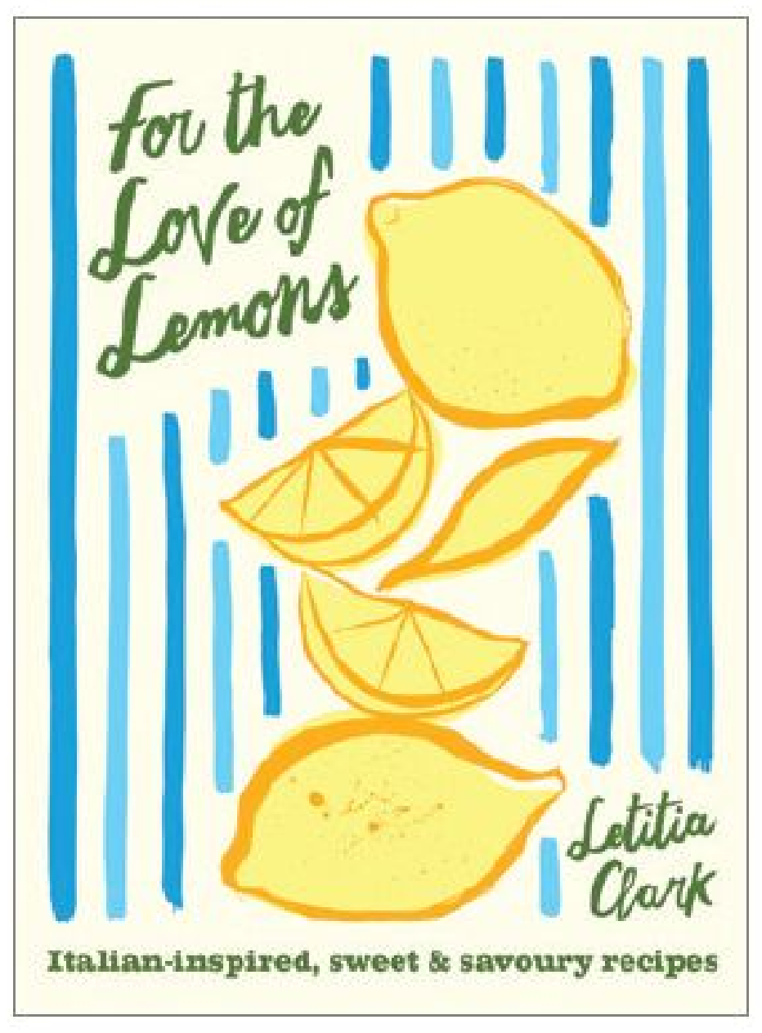
SERVES 6

The simplest of puddings, and still one of the best. This is my classic ratio, but infused with a little lemon zest. I use the barest minimum of gelatine to make for the very softest wobble. Use dainty ramekins or espresso cups as moulds.

- 400 ml (generous 1½ cups) double (heavy) cream
- 100 ml (scant ½ cup) milk
- 50 g (¼ cup) sugar
- 1 vanilla pod (bean), split
- 3–4 g (2 leaves) gelatine
- 3 strips of lemon zest

TO SERVE:
- 500 g strawberries, hulled
- zest and juice of ½ lemon
- 1–2 tablespoons sugar
- a few lemon blossoms, if you can find them, or other edible flowers

1. Warm half the cream in a saucepan with the milk, sugar, and vanilla pod over a low-medium heat and bring to scalding point.
2. Soak the gelatine in a small bowl of cold water and allow to soften completely (around a minute).
3. Squeeze out and add the softened gelatine to the hot cream mixture and stir well to dissolve. Add the remaining cream to the mixture and strain it, discarding the vanilla pod (save this to use in another recipe).
4. Decant into your preferred moulds and place in the refrigerator to set for at least 4 hours. Ideally, remove from the refrigerator around 15 minutes before serving to take the chill off.
5. Meanwhile, marinate the strawberries in the lemon juice, zest, and sugar. To serve, top the panna cottas with the strawberries and flowers.



Discover more lemon-infused delights in *For the Love of Lemons* by Letitia Clark, published by Quadrille. Photography: © Charlotte Bland.

Handle with care

We're often told stress is something to avoid – a signal that things are going wrong. But what if that's not the full story?

For many people, the word "stress" understandably conjures up negative thoughts and ideas: an overwhelming workload, a tense interaction with a loved one, frantically navigating a crisis. The feelings that accompany these thoughts are typically unwelcome, too, ranging from a racing heart and a fuzzy mind to sweaty palms and indigestion. The media frequently highlights studies confirming what many are already aware of: that stress has a negative – potentially dangerous – effect on mental and physical wellbeing. The message appears all too clear – stress is bad and ought to be avoided. Yet, as harmful as stress (particularly in its chronic form) can be, what the media often forgets to mention is that the "stress-is-bad" narrative is only half the story.

Neutral state

Stress is neither inherently bad nor good. While too much of it can be exhausting or crippling, too little might erode motivation and impair performance. Indeed, for some people, stress is the fuel that propels them to aim high and find the resources to overcome obstacles, all the while discovering new things about themselves that might otherwise have remained hidden. This positive narrative is supported by academic research from around the world. Stress can prompt people to be proactive and engage in focused problem-solving while also enhancing mental and physiological functioning. In addition, overcoming stress helps build resilience and fosters gratitude. The science also shows that whether stress has a negative or positive impact depends upon how much of it people are dealing with, how often, and if they have enough resources to support them. These insights may be intuitive to many. Perhaps less so is that the toll stress takes on mind, body, and life is also influenced by the beliefs people hold about it.

Cutting-edge research reveals distinct mindsets regarding assumptions about stress. When people believe it's inherently debilitating and to be avoided, this reflects a debilitating stress mindset. But, as Professor Alia Crum of Stanford University highlights in her pioneering research published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, others believe that 'stress has enhancing consequences for various stress-related outcomes such as performance and productivity, health and wellbeing, and learning and growth'. This is known as an enhancing stress mindset. It's important to note that both mindsets are partly true, and neither is more right or wrong than the other. It's also not the case that holding the latter provides immunity from stress. Take, for example, two people who equally detest public speaking. Although their respective mindsets won't erase the stress felt before a presentation, it will lead to a different experience and potentially to variations in their performance.

Research on children and adults has revealed myriad other effects, too. On a psychological level, an enhancing mindset is associated with more self-control, fewer perceptions of stress, and a reduced number of symptoms of anxiety and depression. People with an enhancing mindset, compared to those with a debilitating one, are also more likely to request feedback so they can meet a challenging demand and perform better.

Shift in perspective

Beyond shaping people's thoughts and behaviours, these mindsets also have physiological effects. The stress hormone cortisol, for example, helps to regulate several functions in the human body, including blood pressure, blood sugar, metabolism, and the sleep-wake cycle. It also reduces inflammation and helps the body respond to threats in the environment. If cortisol levels increase too much, however, or remain chronically high over time, it can cause feelings of irritability, anxiety, and depression, and contribute to sleep problems, digestive complaints, sexual dysfunction, and menstrual and fertility concerns. It also has a negative impact on conditions such as heart disease. Interestingly, there's some evidence to suggest that people's assumptions about stress could increase or reduce the cortisol in their body to a more optimal level.

No matter how much people try to avoid stress or how often others tell them to stress less, it's impractical to move through life focused purely on dodging challenging or pressurised situations. No one can control what life throws their way, after all, and many are impelled to pursue goals they find fulfilling but that also involve a degree of stress. Understanding your stress mindset and harnessing the benefits of an enhancing one help in those uncertain and overwhelming times when you wish – or need – to stand strong on shaky ground.

Words: **Lauren Keating**

HOW TO TRANSFORM STRESS MINDSETS

Like other beliefs, stress mindsets usually develop in childhood and depend on how stress is experienced during formative moments, the messages about it received from parents and teachers, and the way it's represented in culture and media. Although mindsets are relatively stable, with concerted effort, practice, and time, debilitating beliefs can be transformed into an enhancing stress mindset. If this sounds like something you wish to try, here are four suggestions on how to get started:

1 **Take note of your thoughts and reflect on your patterns.** As a first step, it's important to try to identify your typical mindset. Think about how you view stress in general, perhaps even when you aren't experiencing overwhelming amounts of pressure in your life. When you do experience stress, either in your professional or personal life, note your recurring thoughts and reactions. Do you get revved up by the prospect of doing something new or challenging or do you usually sink into yourself, wishing for the worry to go away?

2 **Interrogate the triumphs of others.** Think of someone whose journey or accomplishments you admire. While it might look from the outside as though they were destined for greatness, question if this is truly the case. If the person you have in mind is, say, a famous author, singer, scientist, or actor, then read, watch, or listen to news stories about them, paying attention to obstacles that they faced along the way and how they persevered through pressure. If it's a friend, relative, or someone else you know firsthand, even better. Strike up a conversation and ask how they utilised stress to get to where they are. This helps to pull back the curtain and is an opportunity to gain real insight into how others have used stress to their benefit and in what ways you could do the same thing.

3 **Look to yourself for evidence.** If you're a human being with goals, then the chances are you've already experienced the upsides of stress (even if no immediate examples come to mind). Ask yourself – and write down – when stress has helped you to perform at your best, learn something new, or grow as a person. Include times when it might even have been beneficial to your energy and health. Try to think of as many concrete examples as you can, as evidence suggests that one of the most effective ways to question your beliefs and shift mindset is to draw out evidence from your own life that supports the desired outcome.

4 **Cut yourself some slack.** Remember it's okay to have debilitating beliefs about stress – many (if not most) people share these thoughts, which are partly true. Also, berating yourself for not always having a more enhancing outlook might exacerbate feelings of stress. In moments when debilitating beliefs are circling, stop and question their veracity. Ask yourself if there's a better way to think about stress that could enable you to work through the problem or challenge. Experiment with the strategies here, pick and choose ones that resonate, and take it from there, adapting when necessary. As you work to uproot what might be entrenched beliefs about stress, be kind to yourself – it's a challenging process.

IN LIVING COLOUR

Purple plant foods offer a simple, natural way to nourish the body and support long-term wellbeing

From the glossy deep violet skin of the eggplant to the dark magenta of juicy red grapes, purple foods pack a nutritious punch. You may have heard suggestions from dieticians and health gurus to “eat the rainbow” – pack your plate with colour to increase the nutritional value of meals – and when it comes to that rainbow spectrum, plant foods that are blue, red, indigo, and violet contain antioxidants that can give a serious boost to health. Purple foods have been credited with improving cognitive wellbeing, balancing digestion, guarding against viruses, and even fighting cancer – and it’s all in the natural pigments that give them their brilliant hues. So, the next time you’re planning a meal or reaching for a snack, why not see if you can power up with purple?

In Britain, there’s a long-running tradition of taking a bunch of grapes to sick loved ones in hospital. There are several theories as to where this originated – including nurses using grape juice to hydrate soldiers who’d had limbs amputated during the world wars of the last century. But it turns out there’s some science behind this simple gift. Red grapes are rich in vitamin C and important minerals like potassium, calcium, folate, phosphorus, magnesium, and iron, which makes them an excellent choice for immune support. They also possess antibacterial and antiviral properties and can help protect against infections – all useful attributes for patients recovering in hospital.

They’re one of several foods that fall under the purple umbrella and get their skin colour from a natural plant pigment called anthocyanin, which has antioxidant properties. Anthocyanin is responsible for the different shades of purple and blue you see in foods such as blackberries, blueberries, figs, plums, red cabbage, purple potatoes, black beans, kidney beans, red rice, purple carrots, and many more. It’s one of six dietary flavonoids, which help regulate cellular activity and fight off free radicals. Put simply, they help the body function more efficiently to fight inflammation. Purple foods have been linked to many health benefits, from lowering the risk of developing Alzheimer’s or experiencing a stroke, to boosting memory and heart health, and even improving eyesight. But there’s no need to be a scientist to reap the benefits – simply setting an intention to include more red, purple, and blue foods

into meals could encourage experimentation with new flavours and help maintain a healthy diet.

In Australia, beetroot is a popular vegetable, often grated over salads or used in juices. Beets and their juice have been associated with numerous health benefits, including improving blood flow, lowering blood pressure, and increasing exercise performance. It gets its colour from a phytonutrient called betalain, which replaces anthocyanin in some red plants and also has high antioxidant properties. Nutritionist Melanie Smith loves cooking with beetroot. 'You do get pink fingers,' she laughs. 'It's amazing grated into a simple stir-fry with sweet potato and zucchini.' Melanie says she often encourages people to take on "the 30 challenge" – eating 30 or more different plant foods a week. In addition to fruits and vegetables, this would include things like beans, lentils, grains, nuts, and seeds. 'The key is getting a good mix,' she says. 'For example, you can get red quinoa and white quinoa, but there's nothing to stop you mixing them together and having both. The flavonoids in purple, blue, and red foods are important to include in your diet.'

Melanie also points to the purple power in the diet in one of the world's blue zones – the five places in the world where researchers have found people live the longest and healthiest lives. In Okinawa, Japan, one of the dietary staples is the purple sweet potato – sometimes called the purple yam – which is loaded with antioxidants and immune boosters. In fact, dieticians believe that purple sweet potatoes contain about three times more anthocyanins than the average blueberry. 'There's so much research now linking anthocyanin to important health benefits,' says Melanie. 'They've even been linked to an increase in good HDL cholesterol and gut health. The purple sweet potatoes in the blue zone diet of the Okinawan Japanese have been flagged as being extremely beneficial.'

Of course, not everyone lives in an area where these potatoes are abundant or available, but there are a wide range of purple foods that you can include more of in your diet (see overleaf). Perhaps it's time to develop a passion for purple.

Words: **Jade Beecroft**

EGGPLANT

Eggplants are members of the nightshade family and are high in dietary fibre. The most common variety has cream-white flesh encased in a deep purple skin. They contain a compound thought to protect the fats that make up brain-cell membranes and lower blood pressure. Try roasting them with a little oil and salt, blending them into a garlicky baba ganoush, or using them to bulk out a curry. Maximise the health benefits by keeping the skin on during cooking.

KIDNEY BEANS

These beans, native to Central America and Mexico, are one of the world's richest sources of plant protein, which has earned them the nickname "poor man's meat". Anthocyanin gives them their rich colour. They also contain complex carbohydrates which are low on the glycaemic index, helping with the slow release of energy and regulation of blood sugar. They've been linked to the prevention of colon cancer and contain folate, iron, copper, manganese, potassium, and vitamin K1, which is important for blood coagulation. They're commonly found in Mexican dishes like chilli, but they're also great in Jamaican rice and beans, spicy burgers, stews, and shepherd's pie.

BLACKBERRIES

These berries don't get as much publicity as their blueberry cousins, but they still pack a powerful nutritional punch. As well as high levels of vitamin C, dietary fibre, and antioxidants linked to preventing age-related memory loss, they're rich in vitamin K, which can help people who bruise easily, and support menstrual health. Like blueberries, blackcurrants, and many other purple foods, they owe their deep hue to high levels of anthocyanin. Try baking them in a blackberry and apple pie or crumble, making low-sugar jam, or eating them alone as a healthy sweet treat.

FIGS

This common Mediterranean and Asian fruit can be eaten fresh, cooked, dried, or puréed in jams. They're high in potassium, calcium, magnesium, and iron. Figs are often suggested to promote digestive health because they have prebiotic properties, feeding good gut bacteria, and can also act as a gentle natural laxative because of their high dietary fibre content. They've also been linked to good bone health and lower blood pressure. Figs work well as an addition to savoury salads, paired with goat's cheese, or drizzled with honey. They're also tasty baked with walnuts.

PURPLE BROCCOLI

This variety is a favourite with home growers because it's hardy and low maintenance. It's packed with vitamin C and contains a phytochemical called sulforaphane that is thought to provide resistance to cancer, kill cancer stem cells, and slow tumour growth. It has also been linked to lowering the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and osteoporosis. Regarded by many as a delicacy, the less done to purple sprouting broccoli in the kitchen, the better. It's best lightly steamed or roasted with a dash of olive oil and sprinkle of sea salt. Another option is to use it raw in a dressed salad.

BLACK RICE

This rice gets its signature colour from anthocyanin and is a great alternative to regular rice, with a mild, slightly nutty flavour.
It's believed that, in ancient China, black rice was so revered for its nutritional content that it was forbidden to all but royalty. It has a higher protein content than brown rice and is a good source of iron and several flavonoids. With more than 23 types of antioxidants, it has the highest antioxidant activity of all rice varieties, which again means it can help guard against illnesses like dementia, heart disease, and some cancers. Black rice is also naturally gluten-free. Try mixing it with brown rice for a colourful plate, or use it in a grain bowl, stir-fry, salad, or rice pudding.

THREE TO TANGO

Good communication is the foundation of any respectful relationship – but when messages are passed through a third person, things can get complicated

All relationships – be they with family, partners, friends, or colleagues – are built on good communication. But what exactly does this mean? And how do you recognise it? In general, it's when interactions, whether on a one-to-one basis or within a group, are direct and allow space for each person to communicate openly. It's also characterised by tolerance, honesty, empathy, and the ability to listen to and respect others' views and thoughts, while being confident and open enough to share your own. Many people struggle with various aspects of this – it could be that they're not great at listening, are reluctant to share, or find it impossible to disagree respectfully. Some people can find it challenging on all three fronts.

Pattern of triangulation

When thinking of communication patterns, passive, aggressive, and passive-aggressive styles often come to mind. While these are the best-known, there are several others, some of which can become habitual. Another aspect that is perhaps less well understood is that good communication also involves the ability to recognise styles that are less constructive and end up discouraging discourse, either because one party chooses to end their contribution, or their behaviour prompts the other person to stop talking. In both scenarios, the potential for conflict is increased.

One of these patterns is called triangulation. This occurs when two people are in conflict and either one or both attempt to involve a third party in the conversation. This is different from planned and structured mediation, where a trained objective arbiter is brought in to support the conflict-resolution process and aid communication between the parties.

With triangulation, the introduction of the third person is specifically to communicate on one person's behalf, or to intervene in the problem and fix it. A form of indirect and passive communication, it happens in many relationships. Examples include estranged parents choosing to relay information to each other via their children, or quarrelling friends asking a third friend to arbitrate on a disagreement. It can also happen without the third person being directly present. Think of how a beleaguered parent might, for example, use an implicit threat – "Wait 'til your mother sees what you've done" – rather than directly communicating their own emotions to their child.

It's good to remember that triangulation is rarely intentional and there is no desire to cause hurt. Often, it's a long-standing habit reflecting communication patterns observed during childhood, perhaps within the family, or because of discomfort with expressing views clearly. There are several reasons why people might triangulate. Some struggle with disagreement, so find it easier when an ally validates their stance. At other times, it's to avoid conflict altogether. In this case, the third person is asked to intervene, effectively making them "the bad guy".

Negative impact

Whatever the motive, it's an indirect pattern of communication that can be problematic, both for the person being asked to enter the conflict and the family member, friend, or colleague on the receiving end of a triangulation attempt. On top of this, it means disputes are rarely discussed openly or fully resolved, and it can create antagonism and conflict in bigger groups. Think of occasions when friends are forced to pick sides between a warring couple, or colleagues are drawn into a conflict between two people at work. In both cases, there might be a feeling of unwelcome control, as the friends and colleagues come under pressure to align themselves with a party. But this can mean that underlying issues go unresolved and people feel compromised.

Resolving the problem

To manage triangulation, the first step is for all parties in a relationship to be aware of the pattern and notice when it happens. Common signs involve requests to relay information to another person – for example, a colleague remarking, "I'm really upset about Caroline's performance, but don't want to say anything. Could you tell her I'm disappointed and angry?" There might also be repeated entreaties to take sides – "Don't you think I'm right?" – or requests to intervene in others' private conversations.

When trying to manage triangulation, it's often helpful to talk about it openly while also employing clear and respectful communication yourself. You could, for example, say: "I notice you often ask me to tell John how you feel about things. I feel uncomfortable being involved in your friendship in this way. Would it be possible for you to share these feelings with him yourself?" It's important, however, to note that the direct route isn't always the most effective option. If, for example, a person is defensive and you suspect they'll find it challenging to hear what you're saying, it might be necessary to try another tack. In this case, start to reduce your entanglement in the dynamic with phrases such as, "I'm not sure that I want to weigh in on this" or, "He might feel like we're ganging up on him, maybe it would be better if you talked to him about this privately".

As with everything, communication is nuanced and complicated. Circumstances and environment will play their part in how disagreements are addressed. But with care and kindness, it's possible to set boundaries that encourage open and safe communication and make it that bit easier to build healthier relationships.

Words: **Ahona Guha**

ILLUSTRATION: VANESSA LOVEGROVE

The work within

Creating a workspace is more than setting up a desk – it's about nurturing the mindset and calm that inspire focus and creativity

Whether you work from home or need a dedicated space to focus on journalling, studying, a personal project, or side hustle, it can be hugely beneficial to make this area – however small – a place conducive to concentration and creative thinking. Perching on the edge of the sofa with paperwork spread over a coffee table or hunching over a laptop at the kitchen table isn't necessarily the best thing for your body – or your mind. In recent years, there has been an increase in hybrid and remote working, higher levels of self-employment, and people keen to work on their own creative projects from home. Many begin with a makeshift arrangement, perhaps sharing their workspace with other members of the household or having a dual-purpose room but, as time goes on, it makes sense to make your homeworking environment as ergonomically sound, comfortable, and good for your wellbeing as possible.

A space for you

Rebecca Seal is a self-employed writer and author of *Solo: How to Work Alone (and Not Lose Your Mind)*. She also has a podcast, *The Solo Collective*, aimed at supporting solitary workers. She says that, regardless of whether you're working from home full-time, part-time, as a side hustle, or on a personal or study project, it's vital to create mental boundaries between your work area and living space: 'You might only have a small space, or it might be a place that doubles up as a workspace and family space, but there are things you can do to signal the difference between work time and personal time. Try putting all of your work things in a box when you've finished and hiding the box behind the lounge. Or drape a sheet over your desk as a symbolic gesture that your working day is done.'

She also suggests thinking about the way your workspace is lit, using a combination of overhead lighting, floor lamps, and desk lamps to mimic what's going on with the natural light outside, and making sure you work in softer lighting as dusk falls, so you don't affect your natural sleep cycle. In addition, taking time to create an environment that's conducive to creativity gives a useful signal to your brain. 'You might have a specific candle or essential oils you like to burn when you sit down to a certain task,' says Rebecca. 'Or a corkboard that you set up behind your computer with pictures, postcards, and textures that inspire you. Just taking a couple of minutes to get yourself settled with a cup of herbal tea, a plant somewhere in your eyeline, a candle, and your favourite cushion before you open your laptop sends a signal to your brain that this work is important and worth carving out space for.' It can also double up as a sign to other members of your household that you don't want to be interrupted.

Rebecca talks about the importance of carving out regular breaks for yourself and following the 20/20/20 rule of taking a breather of at least 20 seconds every 20 minutes and moving your gaze away from your screen to look at something at least 20 metres away – which is why setting up your desk or workspace near a window can be useful. If you can step outside into a garden or even just stand at a door to take a few breaths of fresh air, you're likely to feel even more benefits: 'Getting outside is one of the most profound things you can do to improve your ability to get things done inside.'

Setting boundaries

If it's possible to separate your living space from your work area in a more physical way, even better. Turning a spare room into an office, so you can close the door on your work when you're done, is a great idea if you have the space. Kerri McCrossan is a mortgage advisor and runs her own business from home. She built a home studio to create a greater separation between her working life and home life. 'I love my office, as it's like my little sanctuary,' she says. 'Having it separate to the house means there is that distinction between the home and the office, but I also use it as a space for myself – sometimes, I come out in the evening to do a meditation class as it's private and I won't be disturbed.' Kerri has taken steps to make her studio as comfortable as possible, explaining: 'I have some candles and a lamp so I can have softer lighting in the evening. I've added lots of greenery to my garden so I can look out of the window, and I keep all my thank-you cards from clients on a string on the wall.'

TOP 3 GOALS
90 DAYS
Renovate Ensuite
Create my Pitchdeck
YOU GOT THIS
Full time Content Creator
BEST MONTH EVER: MAY
RENOVATION
make it happen
BLOOM

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> *'Just taking a couple of minutes to get yourself settled with a cup of herbal tea, a plant somewhere in your eyeline, a candle, and your favourite cushion before you open your laptop sends a signal to your brain that this work is important'*
>
> REBECCA SEAL

Keep moving

Working environments shouldn't be detrimental to wellbeing, and your home workspace is no exception. If you're sitting at a desk and typing at a keyboard, you may need a footrest and wrist supports. Doing something physical in a home workshop might require a visor or hearing protection. And if you're spending a lot of time sitting down, it could be worth investing in a standing desk, or cheaply creating a standing workstation with a shelf at an appropriate height for your laptop.

Johnny Cassidy, a physiotherapist and clinical director, says it's vital to consider ergonomics to protect your back and neck. He adds that incorporating as much movement as you can into your working life is the number one thing you can do: 'Sit-to-stand desks are good, and the key is making sure you're alternating between the two regularly,' he says. 'You can also do less computer-heavy tasks standing, such as phone calls, and set your laptop on a shelf so you can see it. I'm a massive fan of exercise balls, too. They're cheap and cheerful, and you have to have an active posture when you're on an exercise ball, otherwise you'll fall off.' Johnny's special interest lies in treating neck pain, headaches, and dizziness, and he suggests a lot of health issues are caused by people looking down at screens – or "text neck". He adds: 'Ideally your ears should fall in line with your collar bones. Cervical traction exercises (which lightly pull the head away from the neck to create space between the bones in your neck) can be helpful.'

Flexible advantage

Arguably one of the best things about working from home is that it gives you an opportunity to rethink what a traditional working day looks like. You might consider breaking it up to allow for an exercise class, run, or dog walk in the middle of the day. You could even replace video conference calls with walking meetings in a park if colleagues or clients live in close proximity. At the very least, you could move around your workspace, stand to take phone calls, and experiment with what Johnny calls 'a more active sitting position'. He adds: 'Even if you get up to grab a glass of water from the kitchen regularly, it gets you moving. Ask yourself if your working day can look different.'

Words: **Jade Beecroft**

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GREEN INTENTIONS

With a little care, it's possible to extend the life of your veg, your budget, and the planet

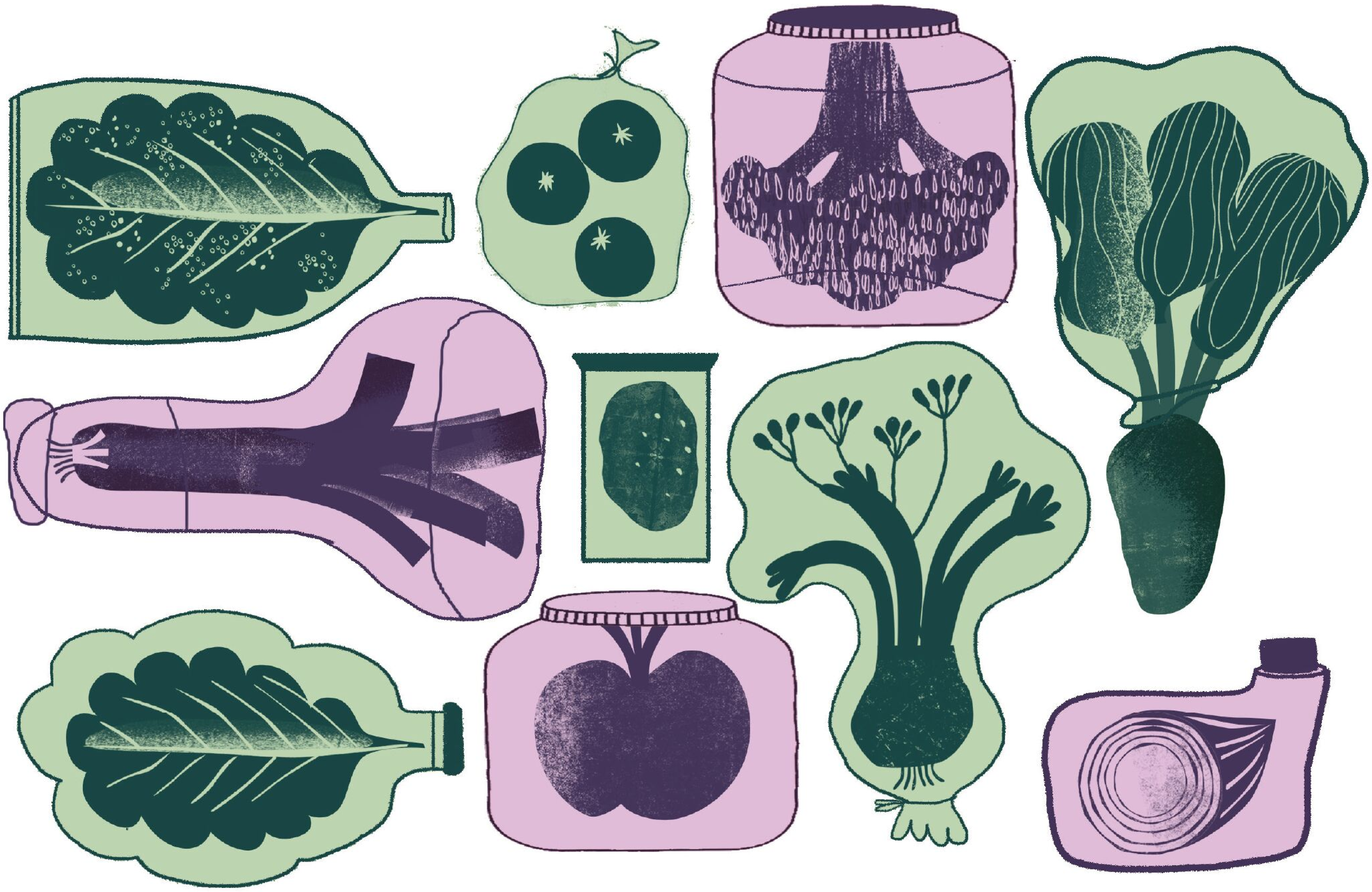
There's nothing more disappointing after a weekly grocery shop than opening the refrigerator a few days later only to discover that your produce is already past its best. Fruit and vegetables are becoming increasingly pricey, so seeing your favourite crunchy carrots go soft or salad greens wilt in record speed is especially frustrating. It's not just personally disheartening, either, it's also harmful to the environment.

According to the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, approximately 30 percent of all food produced in Australia is wasted. Much of this ends up in landfill, where it releases harmful greenhouse gases, which contribute to climate change. This adds to the environmental impact of land clearances and deforestation for food production and the enormous reserves of energy, water, and fuel needed to get food from farm to plate.

According to the Logistics Bureau, an international management-consultant company, fresh produce spends up to half of its life in transit. So it's imperative to make the most effective use of these products as possible. And while consumers might be limited in what they can do on the production and distribution side, there are steps everyone can take to reduce personal food waste and keep produce fresher for longer.

Whether you're making a hearty soup or a light salad, a few extra moments of preparation could extend the life of your ingredients for days and sometimes weeks. Here are a few easy tips and tricks to keep your vegetables looking healthy and fresh, and to prolong the life of refrigerated favourites:

- Leafy herbs, such as parsley and coriander, are often purchased in bunches secured with a rubber band and brought home in a plastic sleeve. But one of the best ways to store these herbs is in a jar – position them upright with enough water to cover 5–7 centimetres of the stems, loosely cover with a plastic bag and refrigerate. This will extend the life of your herbs for a few extra days and add a splash of colour to the inside of your fridge. Your fresh bouquet should last up to two weeks – just be sure to change the water every few days.



- Hardy vegetables, such as cut or peeled carrots and celery, do best submerged in cool water. This method helps prevent them from drying out and maintains that wonderful carrot crunch. Wash the vegetables and place them in water – don't seal them in an airtight container as this restricts air flow – before refrigerating. This can prolong the life of hardy veggies for many weeks or even up to a month. Just as with the herbs, be sure to change the water every four to five days to ward off mould and bacteria.

- Keep leafy greens like lettuce and spinach fresh for as long as possible by storing them in a dry, airtight container in the fridge. First, wash and dry the leaves, place them in a plastic bag or storage container, adding a cloth or paper towel to absorb excess moisture as needed. Remove any bruised or browning leaves every few days to ensure that the remainder stay fresh. This method should prolong the life of leafy veggies for seven to 10 days.

- Broccoli is best kept separated from other produce when possible. One way to care for these bushy brassicas is by putting them in a bowl of water, stem down. Cover the broccoli heads with a loose plastic bag. Refrigerate and change the water daily. This storage method should keep them fresh for five to seven days.

- Potatoes prefer to be stored in a cool, dry place. In fact, the cold temperatures of a fridge can alter their taste. Try to avoid washing spuds until you're ready to use them, and make sure to remove rotten or cut potatoes as they will ruin the whole bag.

Aside from these refrigerated favourites, don't forget to take advantage of your freezer. It's not just for pre-packaged frozen goods – produce such as chillies and lemons freeze well, too. With a few simple tips, food waste can be minimised and environmental damage reduced. Trying to buy locally and seasonally will reduce food miles, and there's also a financial benefit. Every year, the average Australian household bins up to $2,500 worth of food, according to government data. That's $2,500 that could be better spent.

The foods we enjoy every day have unique flavour profiles. They also have different needs. The key is to understand and meet the latter wherever possible. Do this and we can all appreciate produce, protect the planet, and spare our wallets as we strive for a greener Earth (and prolonged greener veggies).

Words: **Ciara O'Brien**

ILLUSTRATION: MASHA MANAPOV

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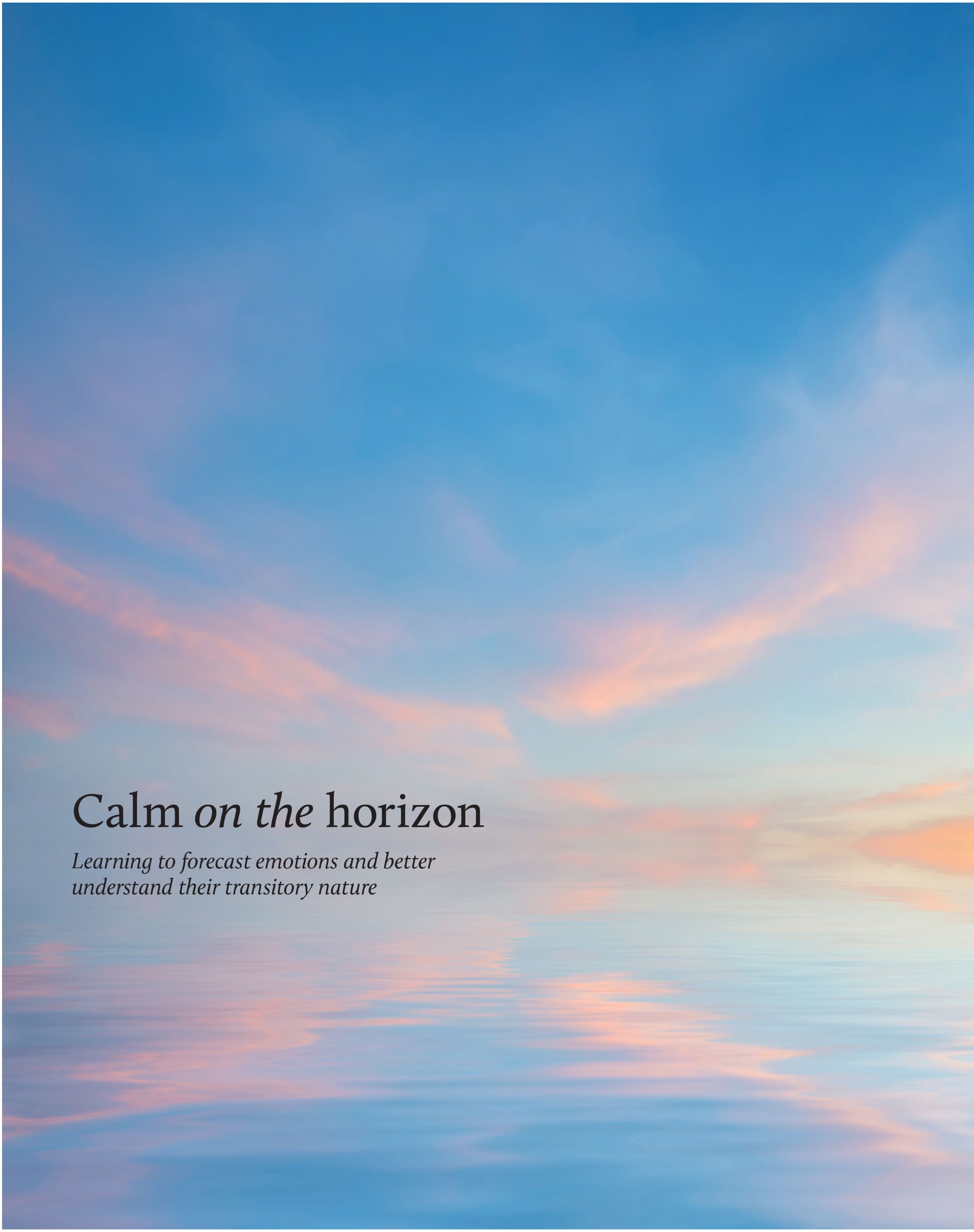
MINDFULNESS

> *'Be where you are; otherwise, you will miss your life'*
>
> Buddha



Calm *on the* horizon

Learning to forecast emotions and better understand their transitory nature

Emotions are like the weather. Sometimes, life feels bright, akin to a spring breeze. Occasionally, tears resemble a summer shower. Every now and then, anger seethes under the surface in the manner of an impending winter storm. And like the weather, depending upon climate (geographical and internal), feelings are changeable, even unpredictable, reflecting the prevailing atmospheric conditions of the inner self.

There are many metaphors that might be used to explain or describe feelings. Using weather conditions, however, helps to focus attention on the nature of emotions and how, like the sky's elements, they can affect mood from moment to moment and day to day. It can act as an internal barometer, signalling if conditions are set fair or whether rain might be on the way. By charting feelings as they arise, it's even possible to forecast some atmospherics and triggers that cause them. Armed with this knowledge, it's possible to apply some weather-shaman tactics (perhaps with qualified support) to manage the prevailing conditions.

High and low pressure

Making time for self-care, whether through meditation, yoga, reading, baking, listening to music, or any other relaxing activity, is beneficial for working through feelings and cultivating moments of calm. Expression through art and writing is another way of exploring emotions. Carolyn Mehlomakulu is an accredited art therapist in Austin, Texas, and author of *The Balanced Mind: A Mental Health Journal*. She supports people of all ages who have – or are – experiencing trauma, depression, and anxiety. 'Taking the time to write and make art about your emotions allows you to stop and pay attention to them, building self-awareness and understanding of the situation,' she says. 'It gives a way to release them onto the safe container of the page. Art and writing can also give you a way to envision things differently, which can be a helpful step in moving forward. You can write or make art about what you wish would be different or how you want to feel instead.'

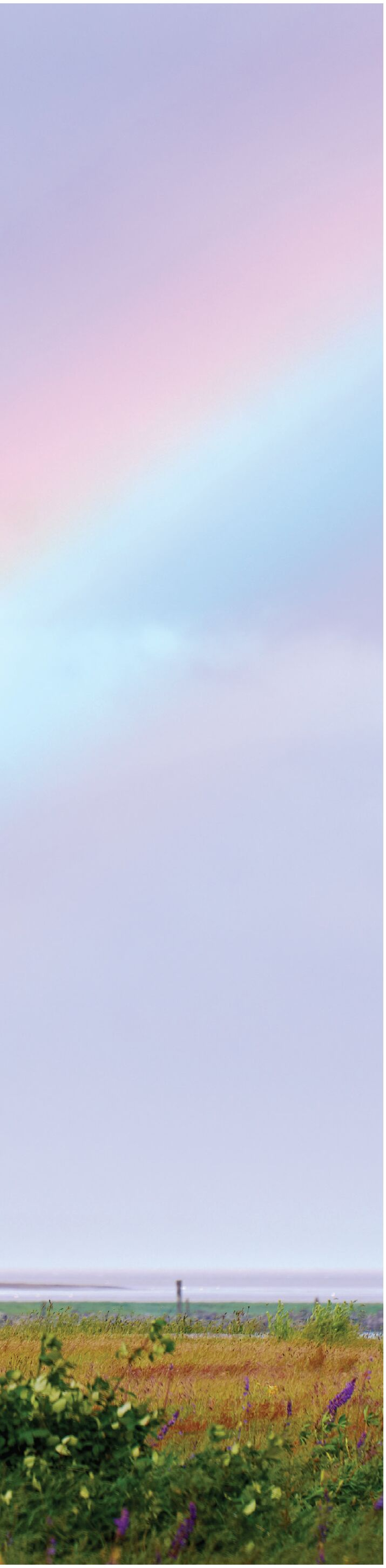
To this end, Carolyn says it can be useful to think of emotions from a meteorological perspective. 'It reminds us that they are not forever and will change, just as the weather does. We can remind ourselves that we are not stuck in this emotion, but we may need to take some action to take care of ourselves until a storm passes.'

She suggests exploring the metaphor in the following way: 'Take some time to imagine and visualise what weather could symbolise how you are feeling in this moment. If you need inspiration, try browsing images online and noticing which ones resonate for you. Use drawing materials, paint, or collage to create an image of your current emotional weather, adding a landscape as well if you choose. On another page, write down words or phrases that describe what you see when you look back at your artwork. Then take some time to journal about how you're feeling, what's on your mind, and anything that triggered these current emotions. If you're dealing with difficult emotions, can you think about anything that you need or could do to help yourself get through this period until the weather changes? Allow yourself to imagine the weather and landscape that would represent how you'd like to be feeling. Take time to create an image of this as well, noticing how it feels as you consider and create this new image.'

Sometimes, feelings can be extreme and overwhelming, but it's possible to navigate through these periods knowing that, like a storm, the intensity will pass. Through awareness, self-care, and, in some instances, professional help, responses to conditions that cause emotional turmoil can be managed, and those that foster calm can be encouraged. Even in periods of prolonged sunshine, there'll be showers, gusty winds, and even the occasional storm. Whatever the weather, it will have movement, it will have light and shade, and it will shift.

Words: **Carol Anne Strange**

Turn over to explore the use of meteorological metaphors…



TYPES OF EMOTIONAL WEATHER

Different meteorological conditions can be used to describe and make sense of the changing nature of moods.

SUN: A genuine smile that's accompanied with a warm, relaxed feeling inside is like pure sunshine on a beautiful blue-sky day. Be present, let the light in, and welcome these peaceful, happy, sunny moments.

RAIN: Whether a sharp shower, fine drizzle, or extended deluge, rain represents tears that fall as a result of relief, pressure, sadness, pain, trauma, or loss. Like rain, crying can be cleansing, washing away a heavy atmosphere while bringing release from pent-up feelings. Know that the rain cloud will pass, bringing clearer air and room to think with greater clarity.

CLOUD: There are days when emotions feel cloudier than usual, causing a sense of heaviness, despondency, or lack of vitality. Recognise that feeling under the weather is temporary. Do things you enjoy and that benefit you and others. The overcast sky will soon disperse to reveal the sun.

WIND: From a light breeze to cyclone-strength gusts, the wind is a powerful element. From an emotional viewpoint, a light current of air helps us to sail through the day, while battling wild winds might feel exhilarating but exhausting. The wind is all about air, and it offers a reminder to embrace the moment and breathe.

STORM: When pressure builds, a storm can arise. The emotional equivalent is anger and rage, which can result in hasty words and actions that strike like lightning if left unchecked. A storm can be healthy if pressure is released in a constructive way, such as channelling the intense energy through exercise or creative expression. Once the vigour of an emotional storm has been transcended or it's run out of steam, the atmosphere will feel clear, fresh, and tranquil once more.

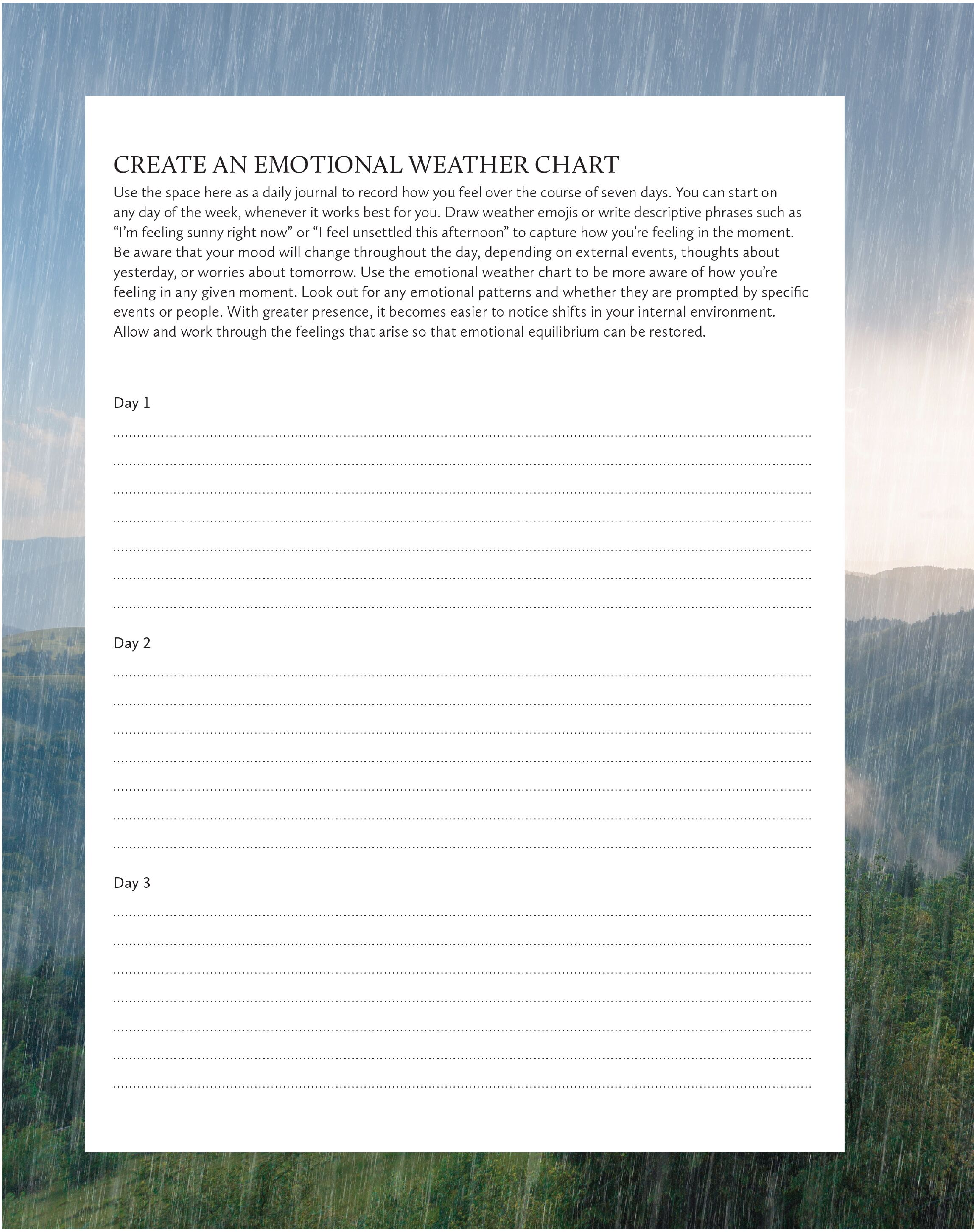
ICE: Feeling numb, cold, or frosty are typical reactions to situations that cause disappointment, upset, or trauma. Icy conditions can bring everything to a standstill for a while, freezing both thought and feeling. This is a time for gentle self-nurturing, realising that the ice will thaw and warmth will return.

FOG: Tiredness can result in a temporary mind fog, which affects both concentration and mood. This will be exacerbated and potentially become a thicker smog from a lack of exercise, stress, unresolved emotional conflicts, and a diet deficient in essential nutrients. Focus on improving your internal environment by adopting lifestyle and creative practices that promote happiness and improved health. That could include walking, knitting, seeing friends, going to the movies – whatever works for you. In time, the fog – or smog – will dissipate.

RAINBOW: Life can sometimes be a series of ups and downs, sunshine, and showers. At such times, look for the rainbow, and see it as a symbol of beauty and hope. Enjoy the amazing colours and bear in mind that the pot of gold reflects all the wonderful things in life right now – no matter how small or insignificant they might seem.

If heavy cloud, smog, ice, and storms are prolonged or appear to be a regularly occurring theme on your emotional weather chart, it might be helpful to talk to your GP or a registered counsellor. Help is also available at lifeline.org.au.

Turn the page to start exploring your own emotional weather chart...



CREATE AN EMOTIONAL WEATHER CHART

Use the space here as a daily journal to record how you feel over the course of seven days. You can start on any day of the week, whenever it works best for you. Draw weather emojis or write descriptive phrases such as “I’m feeling sunny right now” or “I feel unsettled this afternoon” to capture how you’re feeling in the moment. Be aware that your mood will change throughout the day, depending on external events, thoughts about yesterday, or worries about tomorrow. Use the emotional weather chart to be more aware of how you’re feeling in any given moment. Look out for any emotional patterns and whether they are prompted by specific events or people. With greater presence, it becomes easier to notice shifts in your internal environment. Allow and work through the feelings that arise so that emotional equilibrium can be restored.

Day 1

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Day 2

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Day 3

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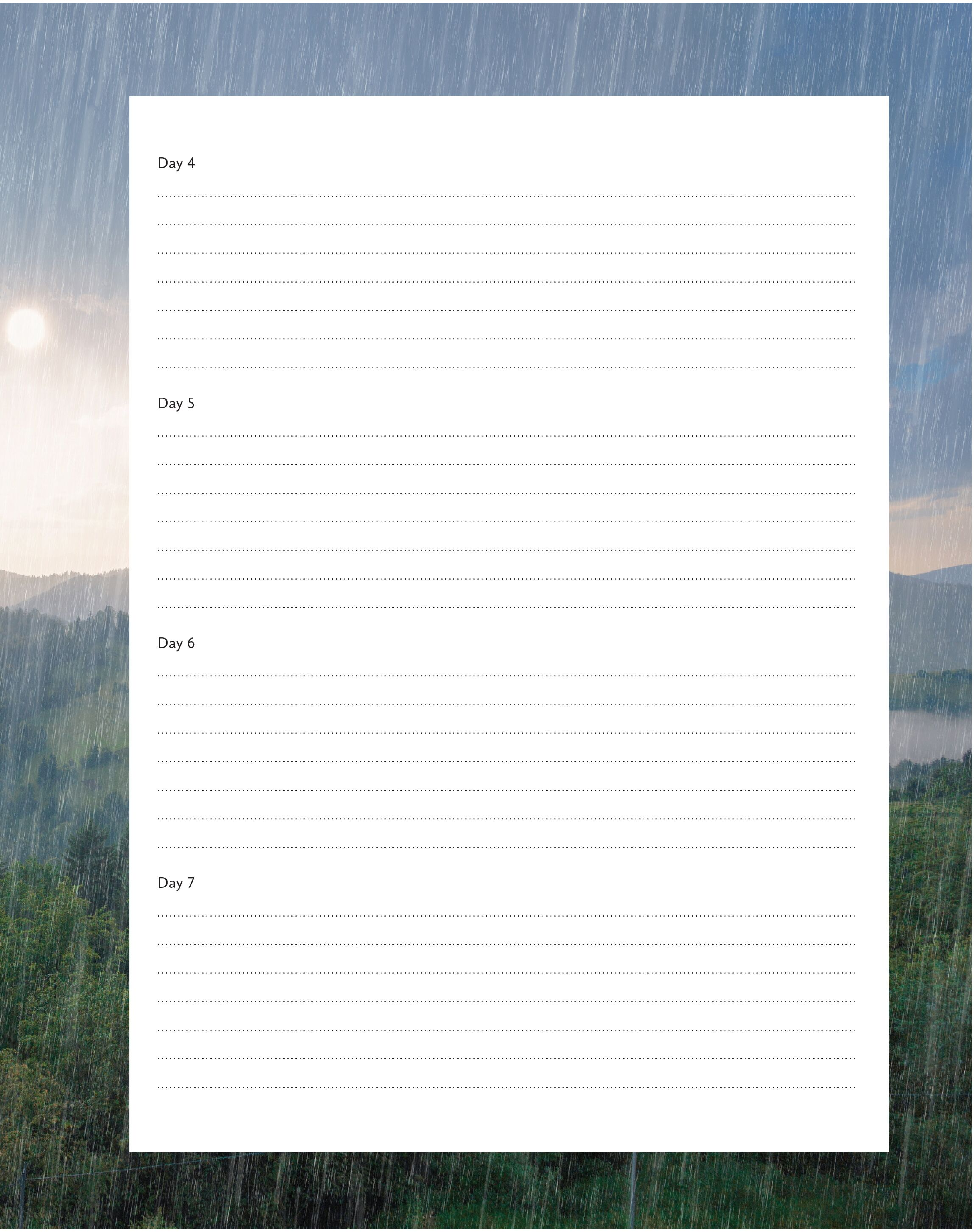


Day 4

Day 5

Day 6

Day 7

All together now

The experience of shared joy, known as collective effervescence, can bring about increased wellbeing and so much more – ready to join in?

As he steps closer to the microphone, the guitarist strums the opening three chords of the band's most popular song. Immediately, as if as one body, the crowd starts jumping, shouting the words at the top of their lungs. The feeling is of absolute solidarity, wild, and euphoric – the feeling is collective effervescence.

It's a phenomenon that was defined in 1912 by French sociologist Émile Durkheim to describe the sacred sense of being part of something bigger, something outside your individual experience, something collective. Durkheim saw this through the lens of religion, noting that when people came together, often for a shared purpose such as prayer or to hear a sermon, a feeling of electricity was created. This electricity had the effect of ramping up emotion, excitement, and even of causing delirium as individuals were transported into a seemingly different realm, experiencing a feeling of unity and a sense that they'd been in contact with a higher source of energy.

The crowd goes wild

Over time, the theory has evolved away from describing solely religious experience to include an all-encompassing sense of shared communal joy, however it's generated. It's a state of bliss that widens the spotlight, shifting the focus away from a sense of "I" towards a sense of "us".

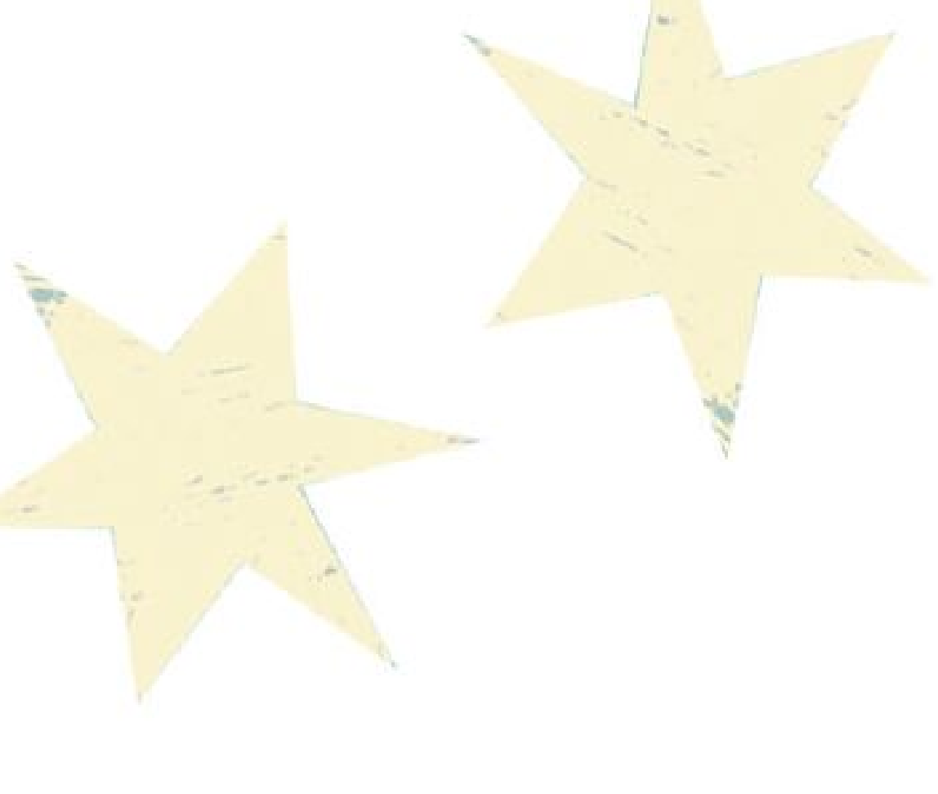
It can be generated in all kinds of environments, from sports events to music festivals (see overleaf). Perhaps you've experienced it in an everyday way – in the group high you felt when, as a team, you finally broke through and solved an issue that was holding up production at work, or fixed a software bug that needed time and dedication to resolve together. Or maybe you've felt it if you've ever marched for a cause that you're passionate about and stood shoulder to shoulder with others who feel just the same.

Loosening the boundaries

This notion of moving beyond the boundaries of individual identity is known as self-transcendence. It can also be achieved in solitary pursuits – you might be familiar with that feeling of self-forgetfulness that comes when immersed in a good book or caught in a piece of music so beautiful that it's all you can focus on. It's not necessarily an emotion shared with others, but one that similarly loosens the boundaries of the sense of self.

Piers Worth, a visiting professor at the UK's Buckinghamshire New University, and his colleague Matthew Smith, put together a research paper on self-transcendence that seeks to clarify the pathways to this state. It might be through generating a sense of flow, losing yourself in creative writing that seems to come from deep within, or running with ease as you feel your lungs and legs effortlessly working together. But you can also find it in meditation and other mindful acts. It's something that's vital for wellbeing and personal development and that offers a way of making sense of the world around you and of feeling at ease within it.

Bonding through communal experiences, finding flow, sharing joy, this is how individuals and communities heal and this is what's needed now – more than ever



Piers says it can also be fuelled by seemingly fleeting interactions: 'Even small acts, for example when you've been in a meeting, and leave [having learned] something you didn't know before. That's an example of self-transcendence, and it's instrumental for growth.'

It's important for self-care, too. Being able to occupy this state beyond the self can come from various sources: through tasks that put you in a flow state, through reaching greater maturity, or from looking for and exploring ways to make meaning in your life, noting what's outside yourself, and perhaps admitting that you don't have all the answers.

As with any consideration of the human experience, balance is key. Piers believes that self-transcendence through a feeling of oneness with others can go too far when it leads to the kind of self-sacrifice that demands you give of yourself far more than is healthy. When you give beyond your mental or physical reserves, ignore your own needs, and find yourself concentrating only on others, then you run the risk of burning out.

Collectively, of course, societies and cultures across the world have also paid the price for extreme episodes of groupthink, where the fervour and energy created by those following a shared cause or personality have resulted in persecution and war.

The American philosopher and author Jesse Glenn Gray, who was a soldier during World War II, explained it like this: 'Many veterans will admit that the experience of communal effort in battle has been the high point of their lives. "I" passes insensibly into "we", "my" becomes "our", and individual faith loses its central importance. I believe that it is nothing less than the assurance of immortality that makes self-sacrifice at these moments so relatively easy. I may fall, but I do not die, for that which is real in me goes forward and lives on in the comrades for whom I gave up my life.'

That fine line between acting for the greater good and making a sacrifice that demands you ignore the inner voice questioning what's right is a hard one to tread. But the consequences of never feeling the "I" pass into "we" can also be worrying when considering the increase of people experiencing mental health issues caused by isolation.

Piers believes that what's been missing for so many people is that sense of belonging and connection. And this is where embracing the possibility of feeling at one with others can be life changing. As long as autonomy of thought is preserved, the impact of being part of something that is bigger than you can be positive. It's a feeling that taps into what it means to be human, informing you of what you're truly capable of and those ways in which life can be most fully experienced in all its richness and complexity.

Let's get together

Being part of a crowd, enjoying great nights out, sharing a sense of awe at the sight or sound of something beautiful – even for a short while – these are experiences that lead to increased wellbeing, bond people to each other, and create an internal environment where learning and development thrive.

They strengthen people mentally and, according to American psychologist Abraham Maslow's famous Hierarchy of Needs, a theory of human potential and psychological health, such experiences are a step towards self-actualisation, where meaning in life can be found through becoming all that you can be.

Humans are a social species, often complicated, sometimes self-focused, but almost always craving connection through shared experience or searching for meaning in something outside of themselves. As US psychologist and trauma specialist Cathy Malchiodi says in an online article on collective effervescence for Psychology Today: 'The sense of energy and harmony we feel when we come together in a group around a shared purpose is not only driven by individual need. It is a homing signal, an internal barometer of wellbeing and perceived health.'

Bonding through communal experiences, finding flow, sharing joy, this is how individuals and communities heal and this is what's needed now – more than ever.

Words: **Caroline Pattenden**

ILLUSTRATIONS: MAGGIE STEPHENSON

FIND THE FIZZ

Myriad activities offer the potential for connection and camaraderie.
Here are a few:

Music

Find a local choir or orchestra to join. Performing as an ensemble can heighten the feeling of being in it together. Or just go to a gig and feel part of the crowd.

Dance

From ballet to ballroom, there's a dance style to suit everyone. If you've never danced before, embrace the opportunity to learn something new or just hit the dance floor at your next event.

Art

Join a watercolour class or visit an immersive exhibition. Sharing a sense of wonder is a brilliant catalyst for bonding.

Sport

Whether you're part of the team or cheering from the stands, being up close to a sporting endeavour means you'll experience plenty of exhilarating collective highs (though there will, inevitably, be lows, too).

Drama

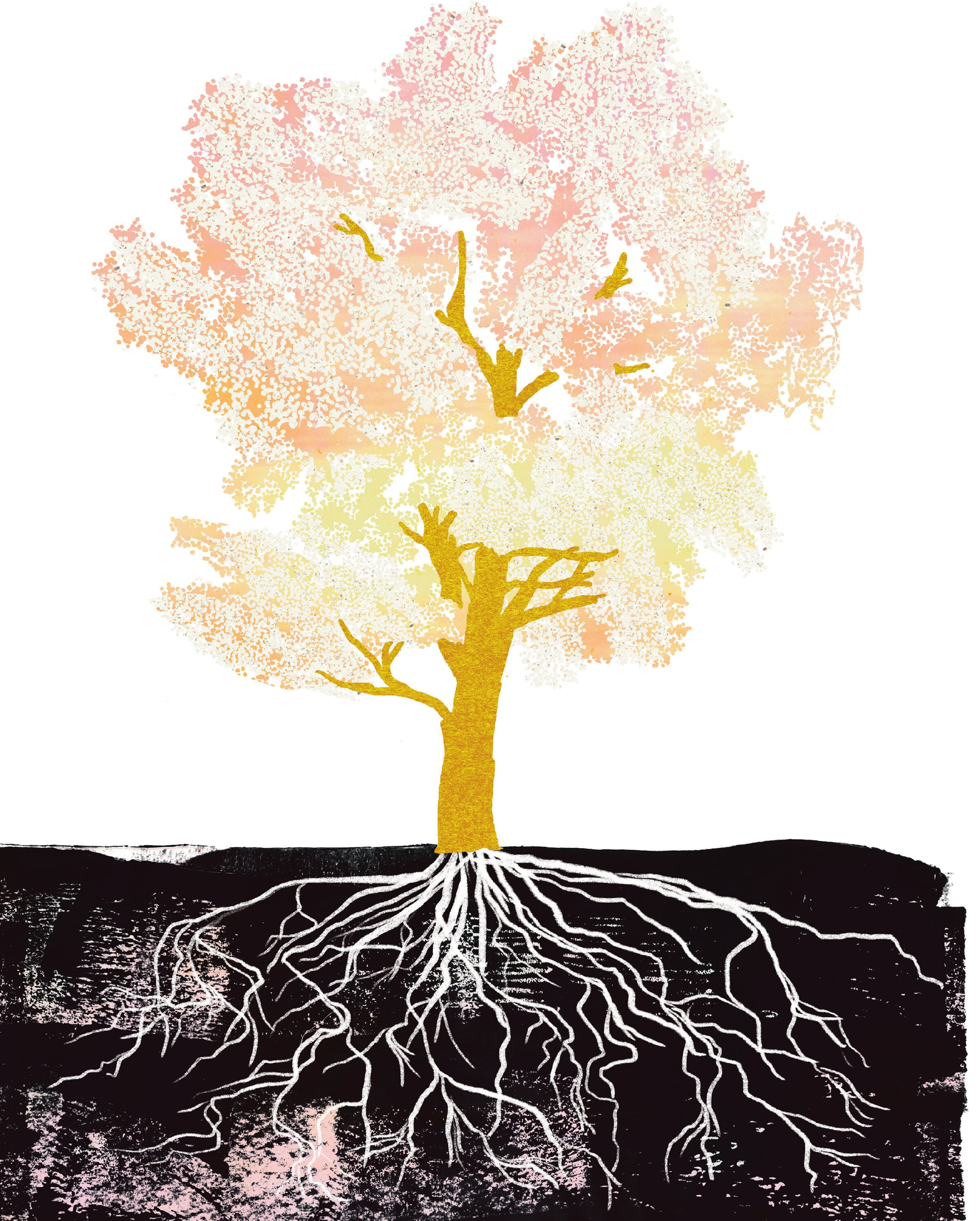
The theatre creates a sense of companionship among audience members as they experience the emotions portrayed on stage. If you're moved to, sign up to learn the art of improv.

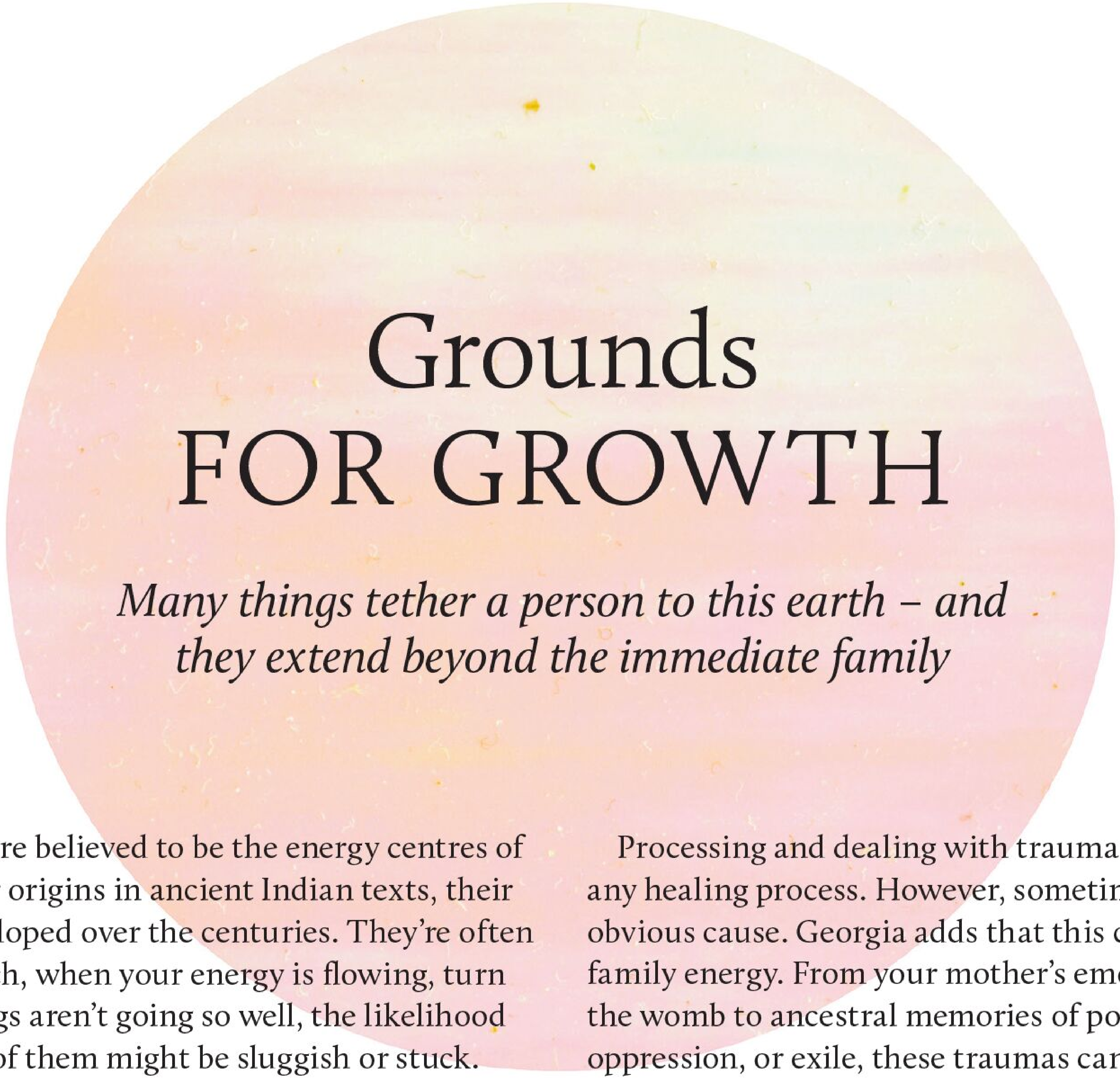
Writing

Join a local writing group or try a poetry workshop. Getting creative and sharing your work can create bonds built on empathy and mutual understanding.

Politics

Throwing your support behind a cause you believe in has its own rewards, but it's also an opportunity to add your voice to those of others who share your views about the things that really matter.





Grounds
FOR GROWTH

Many things tether a person to this earth – and they extend beyond the immediate family

The seven chakras are believed to be the energy centres of the body. With their origins in ancient Indian texts, their symbolism has developed over the centuries. They're often seen as wheels, which, when your energy is flowing, turn steadily. When things aren't going so well, the likelihood is that one or more of them might be sluggish or stuck.

The root chakra is the foundation of the seven chakras. It's depicted as a lotus flower and is located at the base of the spine (the other six rise higher up the body, from the lower abdomen to the crown). It's said that a balanced root chakra keeps you grounded. When all works well, you'll feel steady on your feet, with a sense that what you have is enough. Unlike the higher, more esoteric chakras, the root is about the everyday stuff of survival: finances, food, shelter. They're the basic things that we all need to get by.

Ancestral lives

You don't need to be an expert on the Vedic texts to understand that a lack of secure housing or income can be a cause for concern. Yet feelings of instability can plague anyone. If you wake up in the night with a parade of "what-ifs?" in your head, you might have a blocked root chakra. You may feel scattered and disconnected. Your feet might feel as if they aren't firmly planted on the ground. Georgia Coleridge, author of *The Chakra Project: How the Healing Power of Energy can Transform Your Life*, writes that, aside from material issues, the root chakra 'can also be damaged by traumatic events, particularly in childhood… but even as adults, it can be badly affected'.

Processing and dealing with trauma is a vital part of any healing process. However, sometimes, there's no obvious cause. Georgia adds that this chakra can 'hold family energy. From your mother's emotions absorbed in the womb to ancestral memories of poverty, starvation, oppression, or exile, these traumas can rumble under the surface and make you feel inexplicably weak, ungrounded, and fearful.' So, for whatever reason, if you've ever felt like a balloon tied to a fence post, one scissor-snip away from floating into the blue beyond, your base self might need some loving care.

There are various ways to nourish your root chakra (see overleaf). One method you might not have considered is by connecting your root to your roots: in other words, by investigating the lineage that brought you here today. There are two types of lineages that can be explored. One is the process of researching your genealogical pathway. It's an opportunity to delve into your literal ancestors, by tracing your family tree back through the centuries via birth records and censuses.

Connecting to the line that brought you into existence is a hugely satisfying hobby for many people. Additionally, with many branches stemming upwards, there are various avenues to explore. It needn't matter if a cousin has learned all about one great-grandmother's ancestors: you have the paths of seven more great-grandparents to explore. But despite the increase in genealogical research, it's not always easy to uncover your roots, especially if there's been migration along the way.

ILLUSTRATIONS: KATHRIN LANG

Personal story

Half of my family originates from mainland China, via the island of Mauritius – that's two separate migrations, and apart from significant language differences, I have no idea how to go about tracing my Chinese ancestors. What I've inherited are stories, which have been passed down orally through the generations. These might not be authentically verified, but stories offer the opportunity to connect to ancestral roots in a different way from the forensic tracing of bloodlines.

My own stories only go as far back as my great-grandparents, but they cover the Japanese invasion of Guangdong province in 1938, my grandparents' subsequent escape on the last boat out of the region, the Communist takeover of the country in 1949, and a family separated for decades, an ocean apart.

Beyond biology

But what if, for adoption reasons, for instance, you don't know your biological family? You might feel that tracing a family tree is all but impossible. Likewise, if your relationship with your immediate family isn't harmonious, you might not want to delve deeper into your background. However, that needn't be a barrier to exploring your roots.

That's because bloodline is only one of many forms of ancestry. Think of the person you are and what's brought you here. What are your passions? What is your dharma, or life mission? Tracing the roots of that particular lineage can feel self-nurturing, and needn't be limited to genetics. If your passion is music, consider what genre stirs you. Whether you play or listen, think about the roots of the music you love. As an example, The Beatles were partly informed by American rock and roll, itself somewhat a development of the blues. The blues emerged from African-American slave songs, which originated from ancient African traditions.

But even that's not the only line you can trace. The Beatles were also influenced by British Music Hall, as well as classical music, so you could follow a line backwards from either of those. Sometimes, there might be extrapolation or an imaginative leap if the information isn't there. You might end up with medieval tambour beats or a melody played on the Indian veena. With evidence that the evolution of music was taking place in the mid-Pleistocene era, around 400,000 years ago, connecting to deep musical roots may be what you need to truly keep your feet on the ground.

It doesn't have to be a form of the arts that grounds you. Instead, you might connect to those who've shared your life mission. If you feel your reason for being is to take care of animals, for example, then you might find it grounding to trace a lineage of others who have trodden this same path.

So, if you're feeling untethered, follow the process to ground yourself to your root chakra (see opposite) by diving deep into your roots, using any means you wish.

Words: **Stephanie Lam**

RECONNECTING WITH YOUR ROOT CHAKRA

Choose your focus

It doesn't matter if you make a false start. Choose something you can use to ground you. It's best if you pick an area about which you're passionate. It could be writing, political justice, or home design. Maybe you love the ocean, or you have an affinity with crafting. Anything is good.

Think of your immediate "family"

This family isn't blood related. Consider instead the people whose work or activities have informed your passion. If it's writing, what books fired you up when you were younger and set you on your path? If it's the ocean, was there a person that brought you to that love? If you want to, make a list, or doodle pictures. Or you can simply conjure them up in your mind.

Start tracing your ancestors

Go back a step. Who or what informed the authors of the books you love? What shaped the person who introduced you to your favourite architect? Then go back another step to the influence beyond that, and so on.

You won't have this information to hand. But this is where research and imagination come in. You can discover facts, such as the origins of the craftwork you love. Or you can make a leap of the mind, where you speculate on the generations of people who've shared the same passions as you. Or there may be a combination of both, where you'll discover a story and use that to inform your own ideas.

Go deep into your roots

When you have an idea of an "ancestor", imagine them as best you can. Create one unique person, living centuries ago. Use research to inform your pictures – what would their lifestyle have been like, what would they have done? Give that person a name, and flesh them out. Understand what made them tick. Recognise that no matter what era they lived in, the same impulse drove them as drives you. That impulse might be to connect with others, be fully present, or to be in total focus. Create that deep connection with your roots.

Stay grounded

If you want to remain grounded in your root chakra, regular practice is effective. You can explore whichever avenue you want related to this passion or you can return to the same deep root work. Feel grounded in the lineage that brought you here today. Flesh and blood birthed you, but other ancestors have given you life of a different sort. Give thanks to them and make your root-chakra grounding a regular practice. You may soon realise that going back to your roots – in any sense – is the answer you need.

TRY THESE METHODS TO GROUND YOURSELF

Connect to the colour red

Red is the colour of the root chakra, so start bringing it into your life. Go for the shade that you enjoy the most, from deep ruby to powder pink. Connecting to nature is key for the root, so let the colour do double duty here. For each season, search out natural reds: eat plump cherries in summer and admire pink dahlias brightening early autumn days. In winter, grate raw beetroot into salads and enjoy the vermilion of a crimson rosella on a frosty fence.

Get physical

This is common sense for anyone, but especially if you have a stuck root chakra. Listen to your body and go for the physical activity that's right for you at this moment. A daily 10-minute walk is an easy way to feel more in harmony with your body and literally connect to the ground. Go barefoot on the grass for an extra root boost.

Try a tree meditation

Georgia suggests a breathing visualisation using the image of a tree, with your feet as its roots. She writes: 'Imagine that the energy of each out breath is flowing down from the soles of your feet through the floor, deep into the earth... With each out breath, more and more roots are created, spreading deep, spreading wide.'

To fully absorb yourself in the meditation, add an essential oil, such as sandalwood or cedarwood, to your practice. Place a few drops in a diffuser or mix with a carrier oil and massage into the soles of your feet.

Use affirmations

Write in a red-bound notebook, using sweeping red ink, and note down root-chakra affirmations that appeal to you. Examples include: "I am grounded", "I am safe", "I am financially secure", and "I am connected to my body". Write them every day, until they begin to feel real.

A quiet revolution

Long misjudged as a weakness, shyness is finally being recognised for the depth, empathy, and strength it can offer

Anyone who identifies as being shy will be all too familiar with the crippling and frustrating situations that can occur. The phrase "painfully shy" doesn't come from nowhere. It might begin with blushing and feeling awkward, being rooted to your chair or frozen to the spot, while anxiety fizzes, your stomach flips, and your heart drums rapidly. It can feel like being trapped inside yourself, by yourself. And it often stems from worrying about what other people think.

The American Psychological Association has a definition of shyness on its website from the *Encyclopedia of Psychology*: 'Shyness is the tendency to feel awkward, worried, or tense during social encounters, especially with unfamiliar people.' The effects are mildly distressing or completely debilitating and can lead to problems in relationships and at work.

David Daniels understands this all too well. He's the author of two books, *From Shy to Facebook Live!* and *Silencing the Shyness!*, a motivational public speaker, voice-over artist, and coach. But shyness has been part of his life for as long as he can remember: 'From an early age I was too scared to speak. I had speech therapy as a child and I used to internalise a lot of things and get bullied for being quiet. My shyness was an obstacle. It made me really unsure of myself. At school, it was a sign of weakness, so I'd keep my head down and hide it, like a shameful secret.'

Common feeling

In an extrovert-worshipping world, shyness is still seen as a taboo, which, as David recognises, isn't helpful. 'Shyness crippled me, and it felt like a disability,' he says. 'It was always a negative in my life. There would be times I'd have an opinion and be too afraid to speak out for fear of being rejected or mocked. No one talked about shyness, so I went completely inward.'

In a 2014 *Washington Post* article entitled The Secret Science of Shyness, writer Sian Prior points out that shy people have 'quite a bit to contend with'– not least the word itself. 'It has a number of different meanings, none of which are flattering,' she writes. 'To "shy away" from something implies avoidance; to "shy" can also mean to move suddenly in fright; to "be shy of" something can mean to come up short or be insufficient.'

Challenging the misconceptions

This negative perception of shyness is something author and shyness coach Nadia Finer has faced firsthand. In reaction to it, she made a concerted effort to turn being shy into her superpower. 'Shyness is not a weakness, nor a shameful secret,' she says. 'There's a lot of shame around being shy, but shy people have unique qualities and skills, so let's nurture and appreciate them and unleash the shy potential in our society.'

Nadia released her debut book, *Shy and Mighty: Your Shyness Is a Superpower* (there's one version for adults and another for children), with the aim to help people understand that shyness is not a personality flaw but a complex trait with many positive aspects. She is on a 'softly spoken mission' to show the world that shy people don't need to be fixed, but accepted as they are. 'Shyness has a weird brand image,' she says. 'Introversion has become kind of cool, and something to be proud of, but so many people are shy and keeping it a secret doesn't help. Talking about it is very helpful, but the irony is not lost on me here.'

She explains that, at the root of the problem, lie the many misconceptions surrounding shyness – the first being that introversion and shyness are the same thing. 'There's a big difference. Introversion is about feeling drained by being around people. But even though shy people might find a party uncomfortable and awkward, they still want to be there. I want to talk to people and socialise even if it feels difficult. Very shy people can be introverted, but they may also be extroverted.'

Nadia's coaching work began in 2007, after she was invited to be part of a panel discussing confidence in front of an audience of teenage girls. Up against the louder voices on stage, she found herself struggling to be heard. 'I looked out at hundreds of faces and I just thought, "Isn't it weird how you don't hear from quiet people?"' she says. 'I thought there and then [that] I need to do something about this. Now I give talks on shyness, and I still struggle with that, but most shy people wouldn't even consider being in that situation at all. I'm here to help them find their voice.'

She explains that shyness is not something a person needs to overcome. 'You can't change your personality and nor should you have to,' she says. 'We don't all have to be loud. The louder people seem to think the quieter people are broken and need to become louder, but why is that? The interesting thing is [that] you can't really think clearly when you're talking all the time.'

Joining forces

And Nadia is not alone in her mission. Author Susan Cain's bestseller *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* has made waves since its release in 2012. It challenges the notion that 'shyness, sensitivity, and seriousness' are negative traits in people. The former lawyer quit her job on Wall Street to investigate why society is geared towards extroverts at the expense of introverts, and she has since become an award-winning public speaker.

In *Quiet,* Susan argues that introverts are dramatically undervalued and shows how much is lost in doing so. Nadia agrees: 'Just because shy people aren't speaking all the time, doesn't mean we are empty vessels with nothing to say. We are listening, observing, and thinking. People often talk a lot to cover up their own awkward tendencies. The loudest people in the room are not necessarily the most confident.'

> *'Just because shy people aren't speaking all the time, doesn't mean we are empty vessels with nothing to say. We are listening, observing, and thinking.'*
>
> SUSAN CAIN

David, who's also known online as Shyman Speaks, experienced a breakthrough after getting to know himself better and figuring out what he had to say and what he wanted in life: 'I am shy, but I'm the type of person who wants to push myself. When I was younger, I didn't know myself well enough to stand up and say: "Yeah, I'm shy, but I'm not ashamed," and eventually I wanted to do something about it.' He took action by talking about his personal experiences on Facebook Live: 'I went on my phone with no plan or script, just speaking my truth, and I learned so much about what I can do. Taking that leap into the unknown is still one of my proudest accomplishments.'

Nadia says taking control of your shyness is vital (see right). Reading your body, recognising patterns and understanding what happens when shyness strikes is helpful. 'Try to create an environment that works better for you,' she says. 'It's easy to feel like the victim and you're vaguely aware of this nebulous, invisible force field holding you back, but you can work with it and know that it is part of you.

'When shyness strikes now, I think: "Oh, there I go again." It doesn't mystify me or scare me anymore. Shy people have a very vibrant inner world. You're having conversations with yourself a lot, and finding a way to express yourself is important. If we don't talk about shyness, we can't understand it.'

Words: **Judy Cogan**

ILLUSTRATIONS: MAGGIE STEPHENSON

CELEBRATE YOUR SHYNESS

Nadia's tips on embracing the trait for positive effect:

Talk about it

There's no harm in saying: "I'm feeling nervous." Be honest and connect with people. The more you stay locked up inside your own head, the harder it gets.

Be kind to yourself

Don't feel ashamed. Being compassionate to yourself is important because the voice inside your head is often neither kind nor helpful.

Find your comfort zone

If shyness is about feeling uncertain and unsafe, you can't push yourself the whole time, so remember it's okay to be in your comfort zone now and then, if only to renew your energy.

Embrace your inner powers

Think about the things you can do, not in spite of your shyness, but because of it. Are you good at listening, generating ideas, or being empathetic? Find the positives.

Understand your shyness

It's just a slight shift in perspective. If you understand why you feel the way you do in big groups or before public speaking, other people will understand, too.

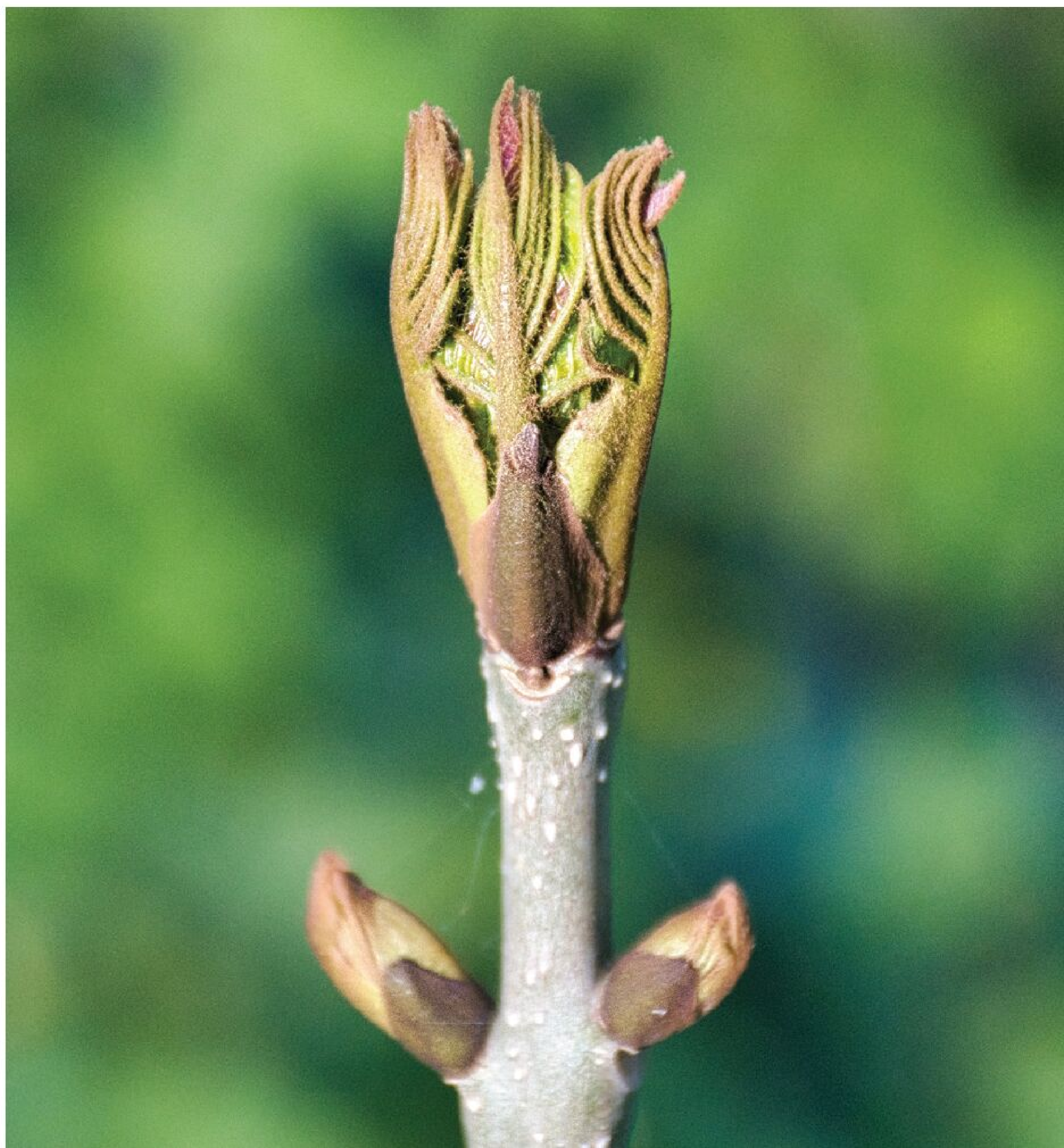
Go first

In a meeting or group situation, try to say your piece first. I hate waiting my turn to speak, so I try to go first to get it out of the way and be heard. It makes it easier to speak up later on.

CREATIVITY

'Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change'

Brene Brown



More than meets the eye

Hills that resemble a sleeping elephant, a slice of toast that appears to be magically imprinted with the face of a familiar icon... the phenomenon that is pareidolia is strangely compelling

While "pareidolia" might not be a familiar or regularly used word, it's a common experience. Derived from the Greek words *para* and *eidolon*, to mean 'alongside or beyond image or form', pareidolia is a psychological phenomenon, where the mind responds to a visual stimulus (it can also be a sound) and sees something familiar in a random or ambiguous pattern. This is the brain's attempt to interpret the images and find a connection where none exists. It's what causes people to see such things as an owl in the grain of a cabinet, a cartoon character in the fold of a curtain, or a smiling face on a fence post.

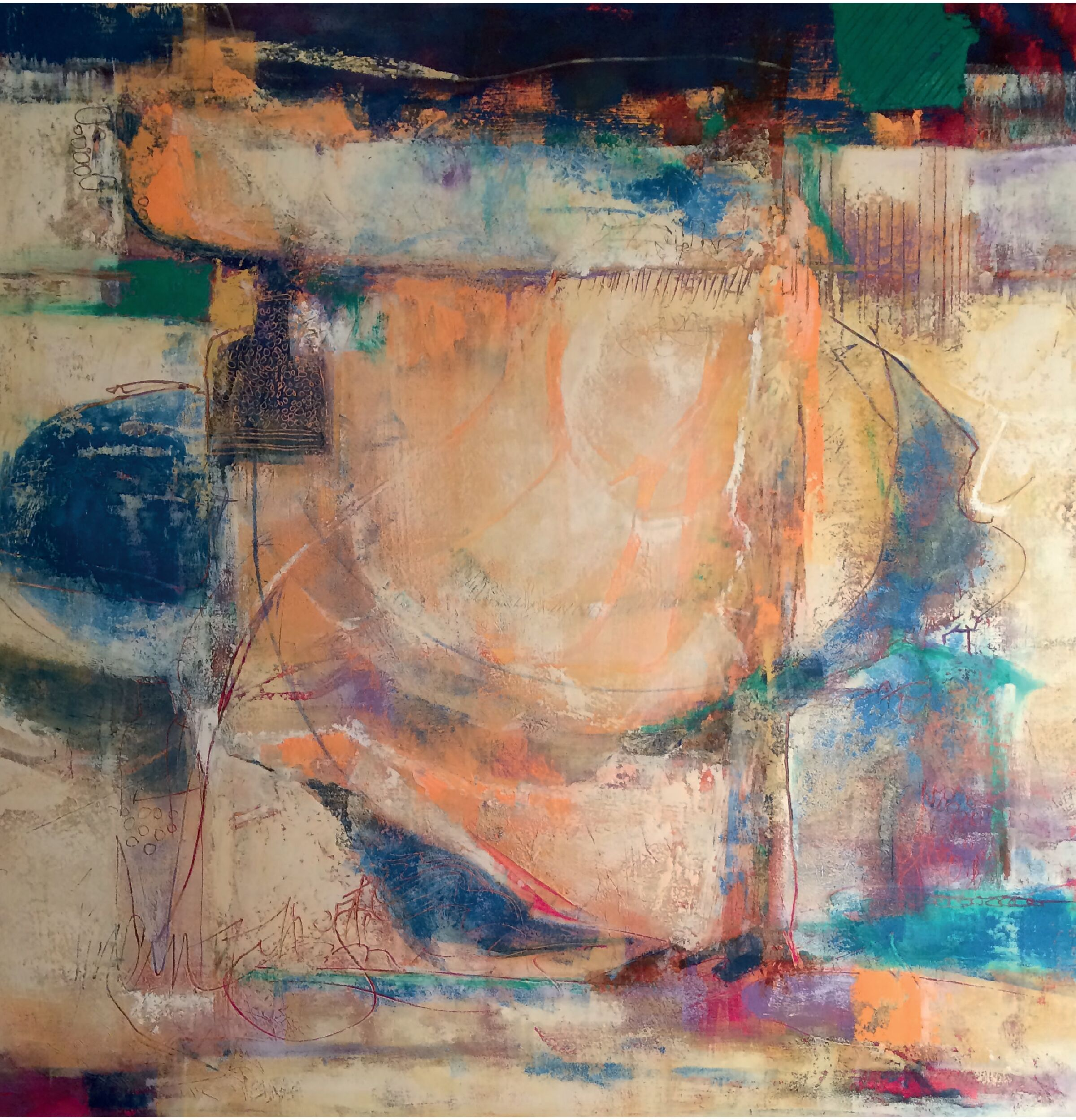
There's much conjecture about why people see identifiable faces, animals, and shapes in random patterns, but it seems the brain is wired to notice or look for something recognisable. It's widely thought that the brain is primed to see faces (the most common form of pareidolia) and is a product of our evolution. Recent research by postdoctoral fellow Colin Palmer and his colleagues at University of NSW's Science School of Psychology revealed that the brain used the same mechanisms to process these fake faces as it does for real ones. Although human faces all look a bit different, they share common features and spatial arrangement. Being able to recognise a face and interpret its emotional expressions helps to form associations.

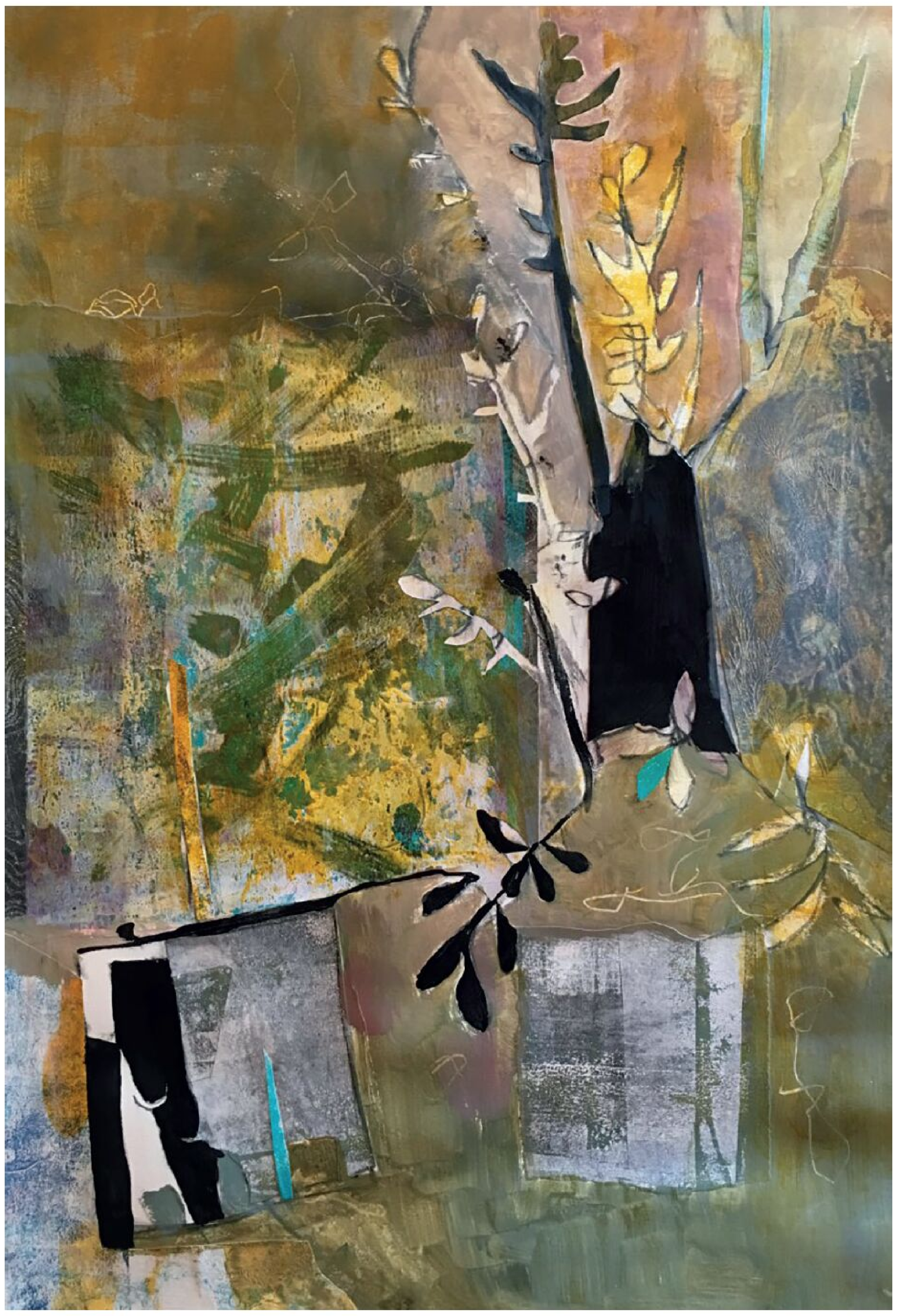
Apart from seeing faces, some people are attuned to perceiving other things in everyday objects alongside what's there, such as animals, mythological creatures, icons, structures, meaningful patterns, and grand vistas. It seems that the art of seeing is open to personal interpretation and might be influenced by beliefs, interests, or concerns. This could explain why someone who's spiritual is more likely to see angels in the fabric of everyday objects. It's also thought that people see things that aren't there when feeling fearful or under stress. For example, when walking past a spooky building at night, it's possible to conjure up images of dangerous beasts lurking in the shadows. In some ways, this is a survival instinct that keeps people alert to unknown threats, even when there are none.

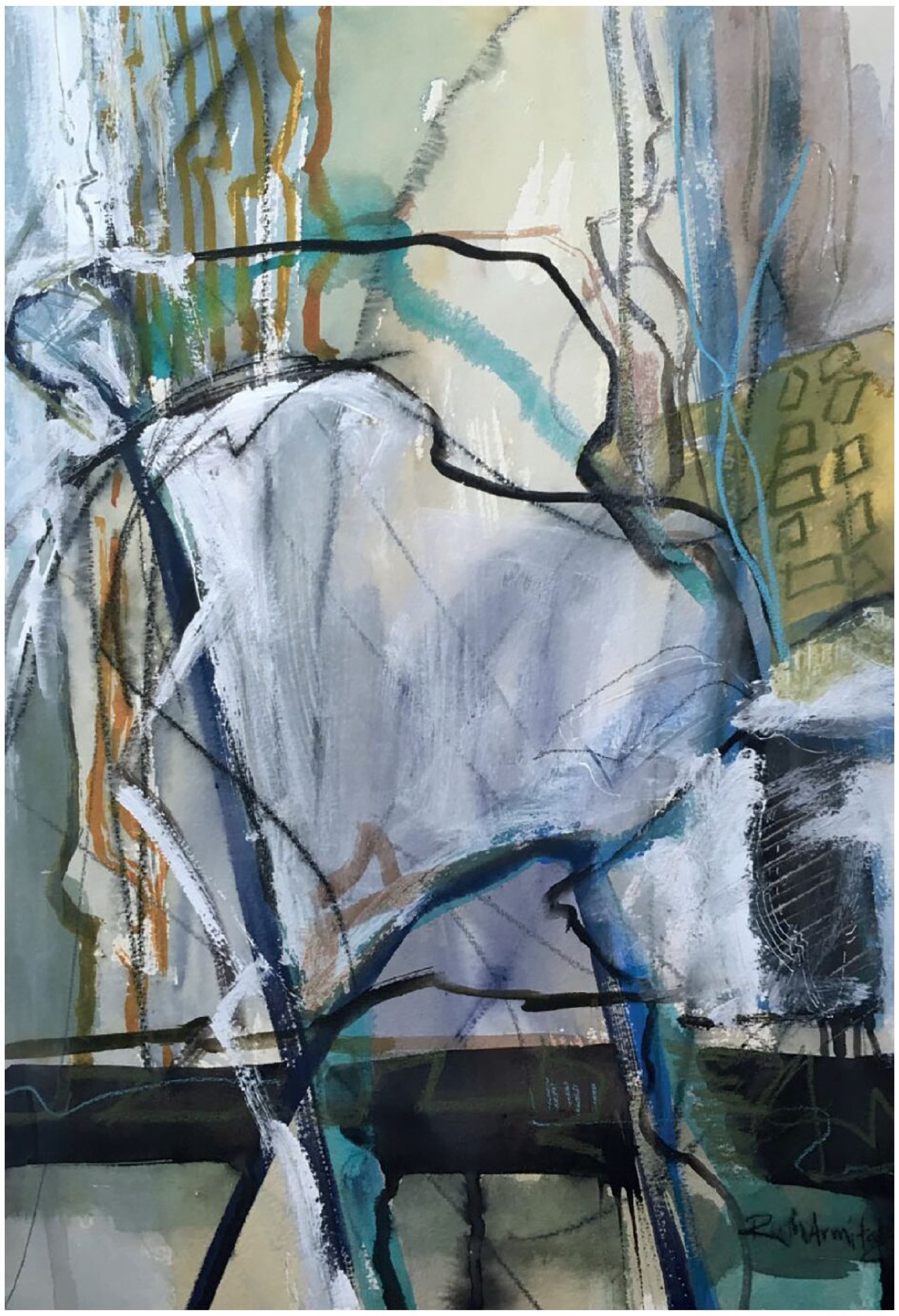
Seeing images in random objects and particularly in the natural world, such as a wizened face on a tree trunk, galloping horses on the crest of a wave, or the shape of a fairy amid green foliage, is quite normal and considered to be a sign of a highly active and creative imagination. For centuries, artists have drawn upon this way of seeing for inspiration. The Italian polymath, Leonardo da Vinci, described seeing characters in natural carvings, which inspired some of his artworks. As a useful device for artists, pareidolia has been deliberately expressed to create optical illusions in paintings such as Salvador Dalí's *Old Couple* or *Musician* and MC Escher's *Relativity*, and it's also used to inform visionary masterpieces.

Images in nature

As well as providing inspiration for works of art, some artists create abstract paintings that unintentionally inspire pareidolia among keen-eyed observers. Ruth Armitage, who's based in Oregon in the US, creates abstract landscapes and colourful figurative works inspired by memories, imagination, and observation of aerial views (pictured overleaf). She says: 'People often panic when faced with viewing abstract art. They think it's important to be able to understand what they see, rather than just enjoy it. Pareidolia can enhance that panic or calm it. If I stand in front of Joan Mitchell's painting, *Hemlock*, I can feel the texture of snow on green limbs. That kind of pareidolia helps me understand the artist's intent. But I sometimes find people grasping at straws when trying to interpret abstract painting as they try to find the subject. Often there is no visible subject, so the viewer becomes frustrated. Paintings of sensory or emotional elements like sound, smell, or passion can easily be misinterpreted if the viewer sees a sailboat or some other object.'







‘We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are’

ANAÏS NIN

When viewing abstract art, some people are hardwired to look for an identifiable shape or form that has relevance to them, which can sometimes distract from the deeper experience.

Ruth says: ‘I’d like my abstract works to inspire the same sort of daydreamy enjoyment one would experience in cloud-gazing or listening to birdsong. I don’t think it’s important for the viewer to grasp my idea, and I don’t want them to share their interpretation with me. That might ruin my perception of the painting. Once I’ve “seen” someone else’s interpretation, it’s hard to unsee it.

‘Rather, I’d prefer that folks simply allow themselves to experience the beauty and mystery inherent in an abstract work. Titles are often great clues to help viewers translate the visual language of artwork into a satisfying and memorable experience. Of course, the greatest compliment is when a viewer reads the emotional language of a painting and takes it to heart. That is the power of abstraction – a symbolic language that can be much more powerful than realism, because of its unique ability to be read like poetry rather than journalism.’

Therapeutic uses

Pareidolia often comes into play in art therapy, a mode of psychotherapy that uses art materials rather than words as a way to communicate and express feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Sue Bulmer is a registered art therapist working with individuals and organisations. She says: ‘As humans, we are all biologically wired to try to make sense of our experiences, which may be why we do seek out patterns or something recognisable in random objects or visual stimuli. As an art therapist I work with people, not to diagnose them, but to help them explore what their images could mean to them at that particular time. I help them to make sense of the images and find their own meanings.’

PHOTOGRAPHS (THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE): © RUTH ARMITAGE

Sue says that art therapists don't always stick to set directives or art tasks, but depending on the individual, they may sometimes work in this way. For example, by generating some spontaneous art, in the form of a scribble or squiggle drawing with ink and string or ink blots, and perhaps using the non-dominant hand or with the eyes closed, marks can be made without any conscious planning or intent. 'Once the image is complete, we explore together and use free association to try and identify something recognisable to the client, which we can then work on further in the session,' says Sue. 'This is a non-threatening way to begin to explore what their internal imagery means for them and can lead to increased self-understanding, personal transformation, and maybe even a sense of mastery, accomplishment, and liberation.'

Get creative

Perhaps seeing this way will inspire your own creativity or provide insights that hold personal meaning. At the very least, it's possible to simply enjoy the spontaneity of this wonderful phenomenon. Take pictures of things you notice and share them on social media. Be ready for a lively discussion as friends point out what they see, which can often be something completely different. Once you start noticing instances of pareidolia, the world can take on a whole new perspective.

Words: **Carol Anne Strange**

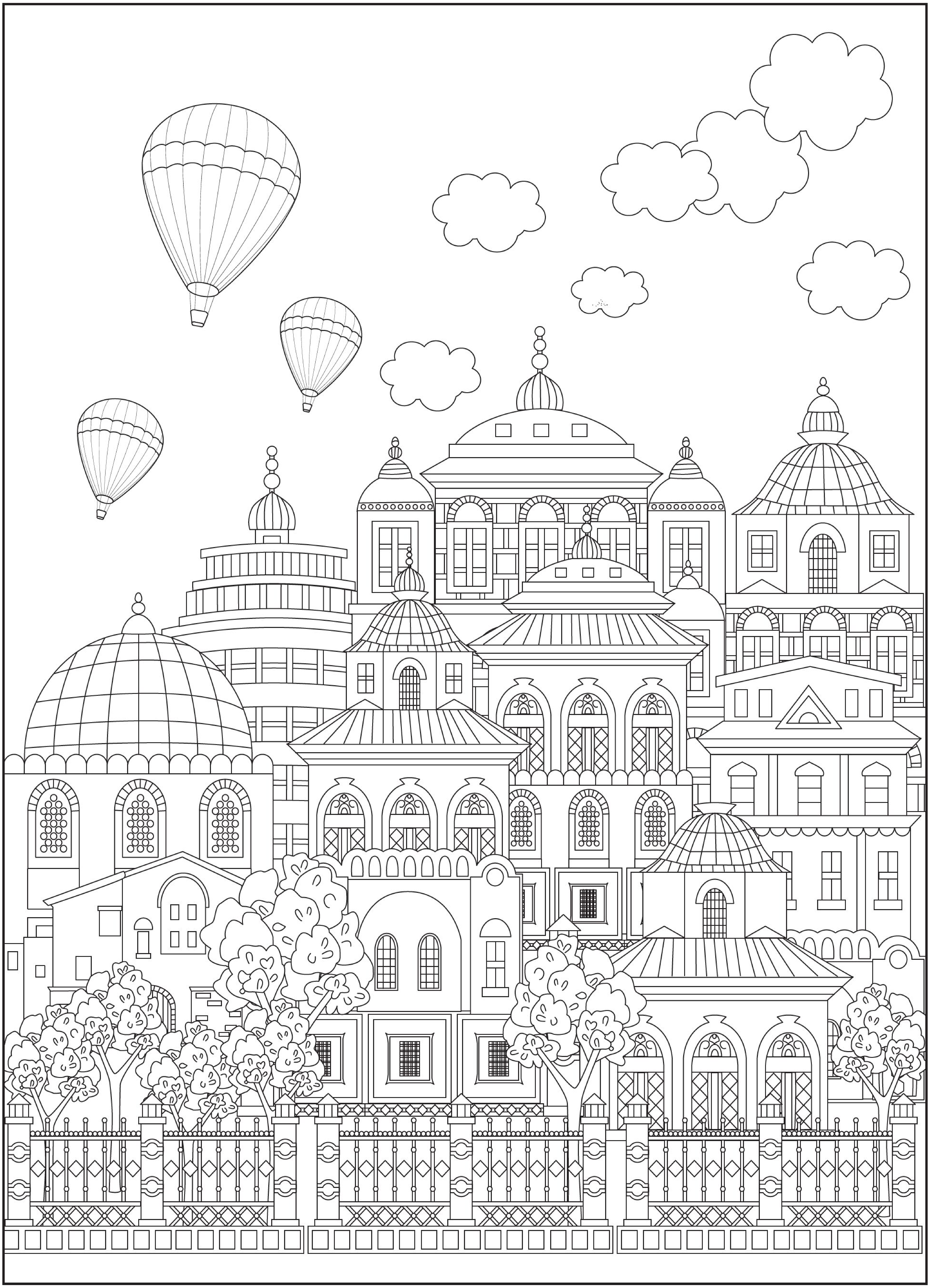
Pareidolia insights

- Rocks that naturally resemble faces or other recognisable forms are called mimetoliths. Examples include the Elephant Rock on Heimaey, Iceland (pictured page 72), Queen's Head in Yehliu Geopark, Taiwan (opposite), and the man in the moon.

- In Chichibu, Japan, there's a dedicated museum that displays rocks that look like faces. The Chichibu Chinsekikan, or the Hall of Curious Stones, perhaps the only museum of its kind, houses more than 1,700 face-like rocks, including an Elvis Presley and other celebrity lookalikes.

- Instances of spiritual pareidolia involve sightings of holy figures that miraculously appear in mundane objects. Examples include people seeing Jesus in the flames of the Notre Dame cathedral fire of 2019, and the face of the Virgin Mary appearing on a grilled cheese sandwich that sold on eBay for $43,000. Perhaps the most famous case is the imprint of a man's face, which many believe to be that of Jesus Christ, on the Shroud of Turin (opposite).

- Auditory pareidolia is hearing phantom words, phrases, or sounds, often in a piece of music or recording, but it can also be natural sounds, such as whispers heard in the breeze or a human-like curlew scream.



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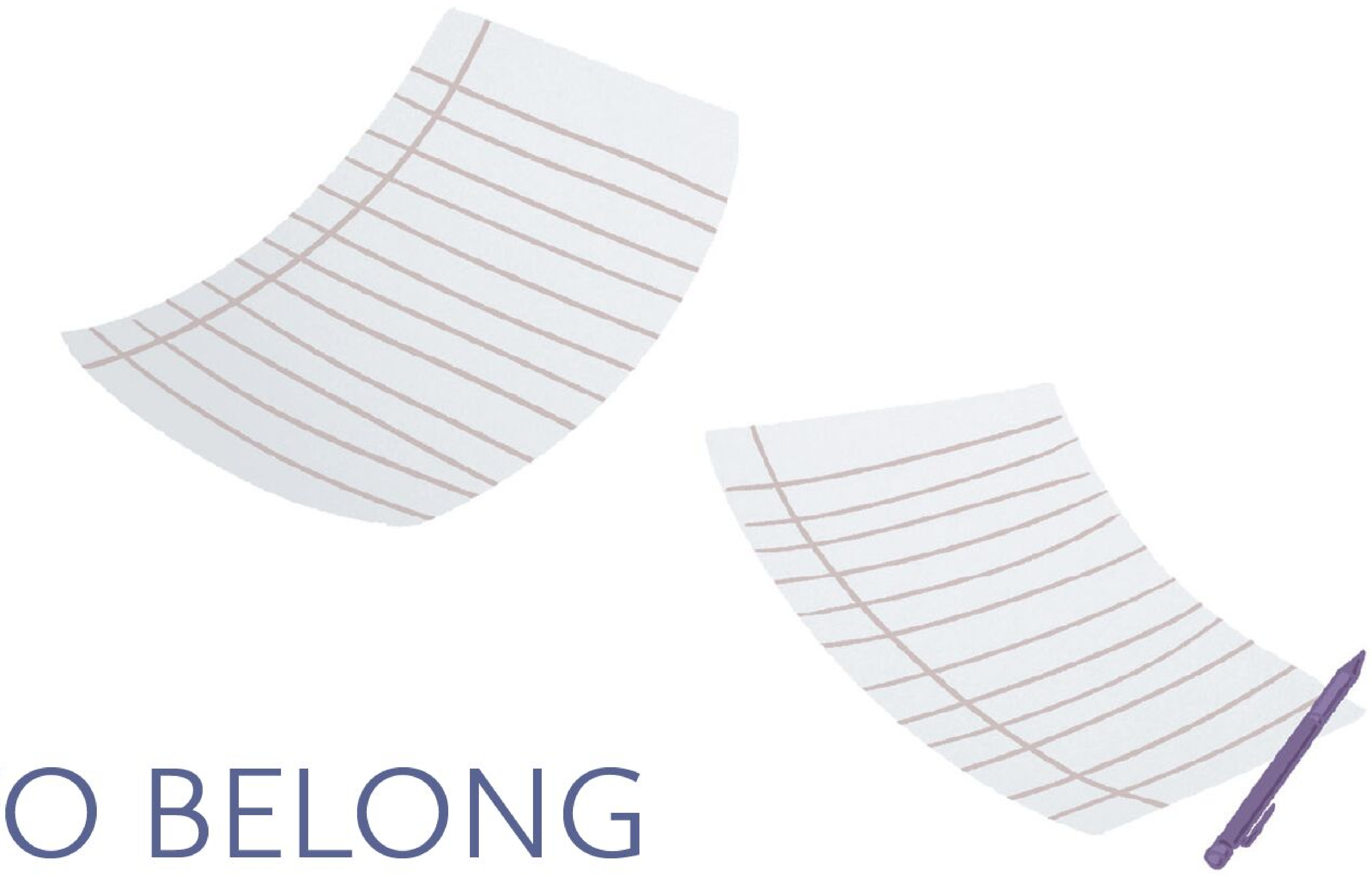


WRITE TO BELONG

Exploring the power of community writing to connect, heal, and inspire

Whether it's writing news stories, penning epic novels, managing social media posts, or translating ancient texts, there are myriad careers that involve words. One lesser-known role, perhaps, involves writers working in their community, collaborating with and supporting people from all walks of life and encouraging them to express their creativity through writing. It could involve running workshops, being a writer in residence at a library, or fostering a love of the arts in children.

Visionary schemes

The work is linked to the community arts movement that emerged in the 20th century and nurtured dozens of schemes in a variety of places. In Australia, creative writing has been introduced into correctional centres through programs like Red Room Poetry's "Unlocked", which supports incarcerated people to write and share poetry. Beyond correctional centres, creative writing has also found a place in therapeutic settings. In the 1960s, American psychologist Ira Progoff pioneered the use of journalling for wellbeing in New York City. Today, community writers work in hospitals, care homes, and other health and social-care settings. And the most exciting thing is that no matter what you do as your day job, if you're passionate about poetry or enjoy penning short stories, there are opportunities to get involved.

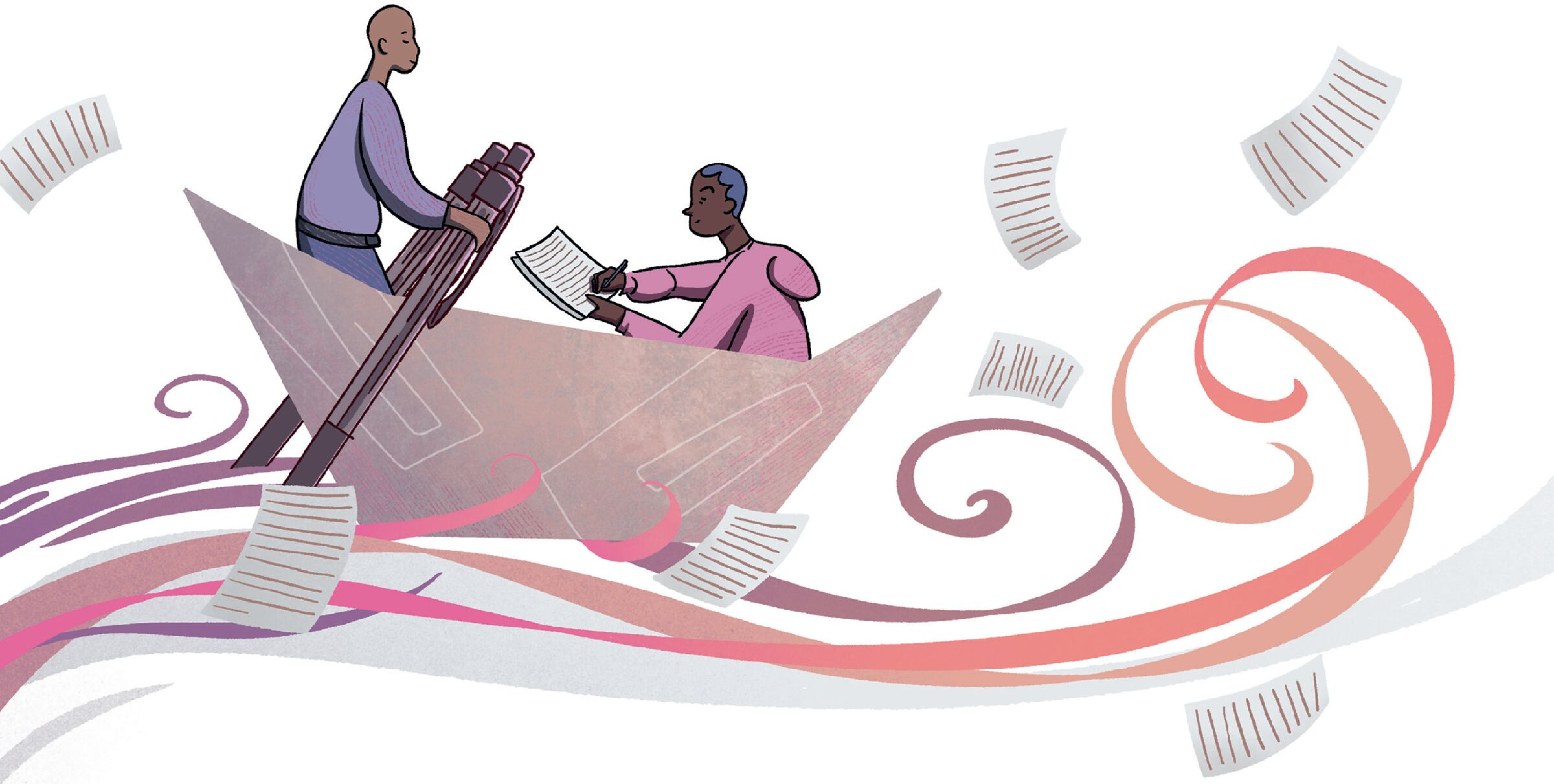
River Wolton, author of *Getting Started as a Writer in the Community*, has worked with communities in a range of settings and says that it's about helping others find their voice: 'There are often blockages or a sense of the inner critic, but if you can get past that, everybody has a story to tell. Everybody has something to say, and it's just about the different ways of unlocking that.'

It's a sentiment shared by Gabriella Gay, a community-based writer. She's done everything from running poetry workshops to being a poet in residence at a car-boot sale, highlighting the diverse places writers can work. 'There's always this great power of having people telling their story, exploring through writing,' she says.

Writing for wellbeing

For participants, community writing workshops and events offer the space to explore experiences creatively, which is often beneficial for wellbeing. River cites the impact of one group that supported young people with mental health conditions. '[Writing] was a way they could find some commonality with each other and their interests, exploring different parts of their lives and their experiences,' she says. 'So, they weren't just recipients of mental health services, they were young people with a whole range of other stuff going on.'

Gabriella also works with marginalised people, and says it gives those who often feel overlooked in society the opportunity to explore and share their experiences in a supportive environment – and to be listened to and feel valued.



Community writing also encourages people to leave the house and meet others, which can be a lifeline for those who feel isolated. There are also the benefits that come with lifelong learning. Mental health organisations like Beyond Blue encourage learning new skills as a key part of maintaining wellbeing. Doing something like joining a writing group can boost confidence, provide a sense of purpose, aid connection with others, and nurture a sense of community. It offers a space for self-reflection and the chance to experience the joy that can come with being creative.

Becoming a writer in the community is enjoyable and worthwhile. It's a chance to share your passion while helping others develop their writing skills. There's also the satisfaction of giving something back, building a sense of belonging to where you live, and getting to know local people. 'It's a great privilege to work with people in this way and to hear their stories,' says River. 'There's a magic that happens when people find the courage to express themselves and to create something that hadn't existed before. It's just this kind of incredible alchemy that can happen. You see the transformation and there's a real delight in it.'

The benefits flow both ways, as everyone's writing is enriched by the experience. Gabriella, for example, has found that learning about other people and different lives has given her a broader understanding of the world and its inhabitants, which feeds into her own poetry.

The write path

There's no set route to becoming a writer in the community. To start, consider your own skills. Gabriella emphasises the need to communicate well and be a good listener. While you don't need to be a published author, having some level of ability and confidence in the craft is important, so you can guide others. A writer-in-residence post, meanwhile, often requires you to produce your own prose, usually in response to a place or a theme, so you would need to feel able to do this.

Lending your experience

River and Gabriella both suggest shadowing those in similar roles to gain a sense of what's involved and whether it's something you'd enjoy. Look online for a local literature development agency to see if it can put you in touch with someone to shadow. Sometimes, opportunities are advertised online by charities or arts organisations. 'I also advocate coming up with your own projects, or approaching places and making yourself known,' says Gabriella. You could look up organisations in your area that might welcome someone to support their clients creatively (see opposite). This could be a women's refuge, a homelessness charity, or a community café.

Working as a writer in the community empowers people to express themselves creatively and to share something of their inner being through words. Whichever route you choose, it's a way of making a difference.

ILLUSTRATIONS: ROWENA SHEEHAN

GET INVOLVED

Writers in the community work in varied settings. Here are just a few:

- **Schools.** Many schools welcome writers who deliver creative sessions for pupils. This gives children and young people the opportunity to try different writing techniques and helps inspire a love of prose and the arts generally. You'll need to feel happy and confident in communicating with children and making sure your resources are pitched appropriately for the age of the participants.

- **Community groups.** Get in touch with your neighbourhood community centre to see if they'd be interested in having you host writing workshops for members. It's a great way to support your local area and get to know your neighbours. Local councils usually have a list of community groups in their district.

- **Disability charities.** Disabled people face marginalisation in society and writing is a powerful way to express their experiences and advocate for change. Look online for local groups supporting people whose lives and potential are limited by an environment that doesn't accommodate difference.

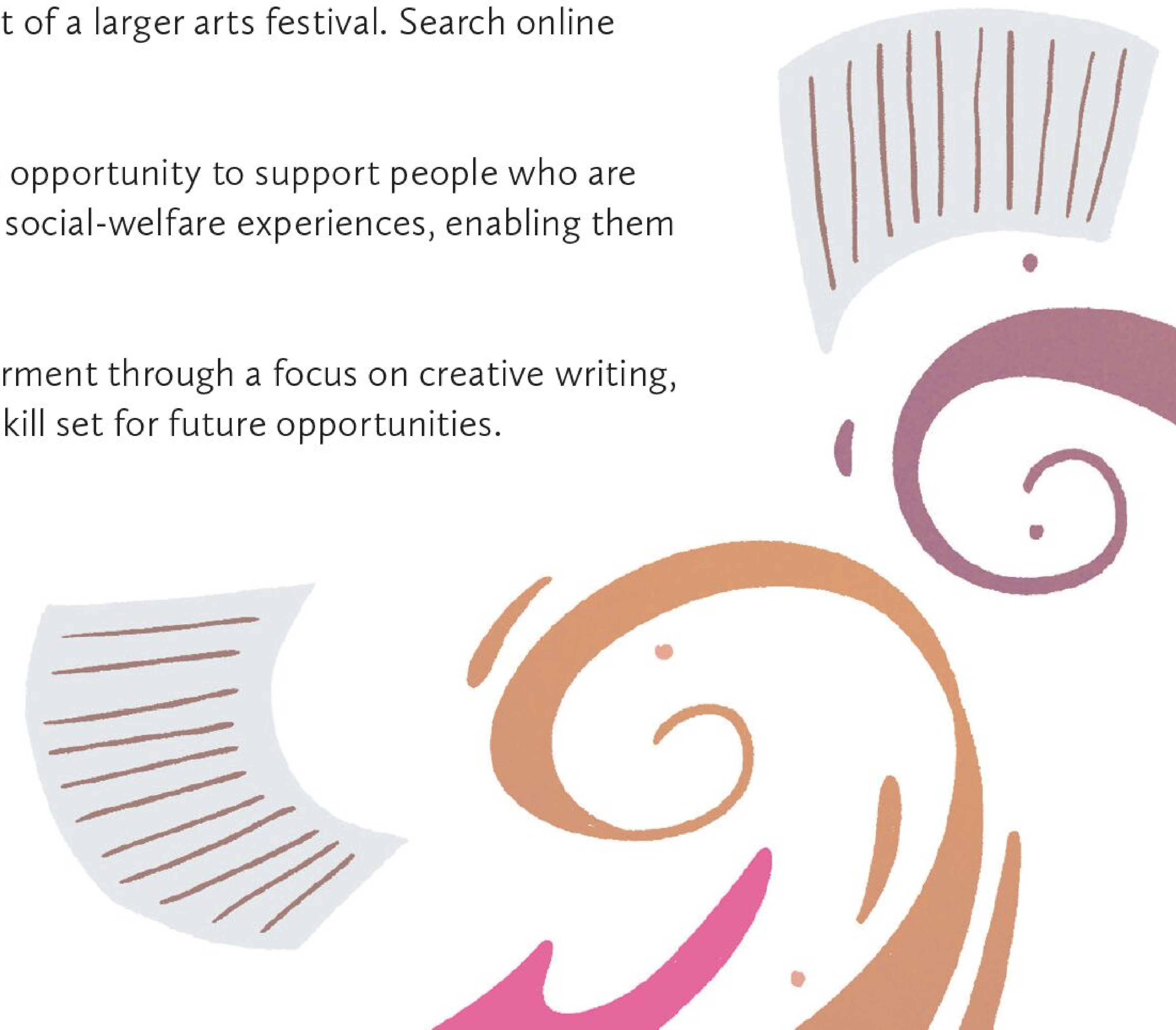
- **Refugee and asylum-seeker support groups.** Many Australian organisations, like the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) in Melbourne or Settlement Services International in NSW, welcome help from people with language skills or creative backgrounds. As well as using creative writing to explore personal stories, it can be a way for people to connect with others and reflect on both their past and the community they're now part of. These programs are often run by local charities or volunteers – search online to find groups in your area and how you might be able to contribute.

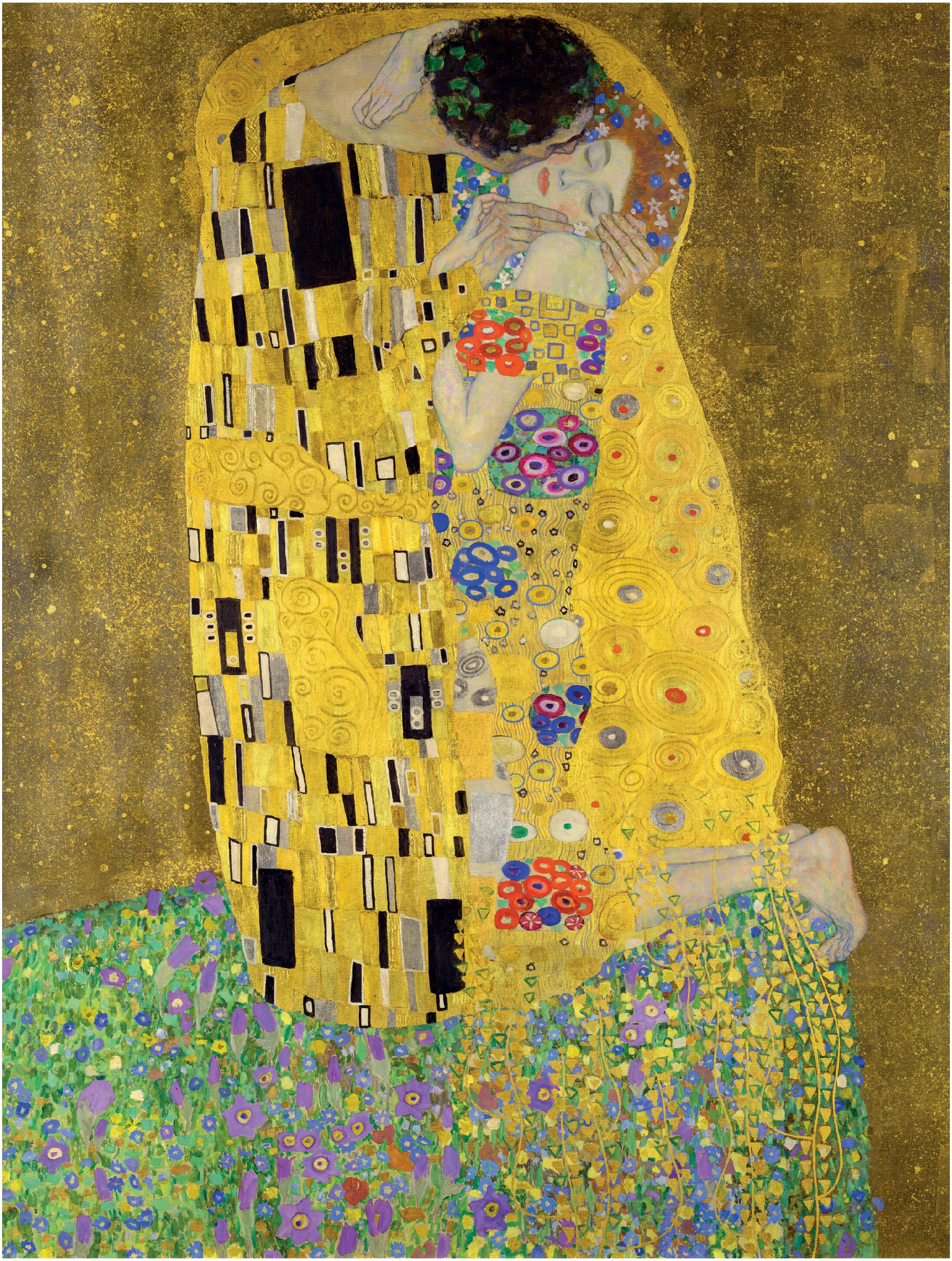
- **Arts organisations.** Offers from writers to get involved in local arts programs are generally welcomed. It's worth asking what opportunities are available and explaining what you can offer, whether it's running a workshop or performing as part of a larger arts festival. Search online for local community arts groups.

- **Health and social-care settings.** This offers an opportunity to support people who are often navigating challenging physical, emotional, and social-welfare experiences, enabling them to share their stories and build their confidence.

- **Prisons.** Offenders can find meaning and empowerment through a focus on creative writing, which supports their rehabilitation and widens their skill set for future opportunities.

Words: **Caroline Butterwick**





THE ART *of influence*

A closer look at the long-overlooked power of the muse in shaping creative legacies

Whenever you next drift into a reverie, musing on life, or find yourself deeply amused about any given subject, spare a moment to consider the origins of the word "muse". The English noun stems from the old French word *muse*, via the Latin *Musa* and, before that, going back to the place where the concept originated, the Greek *Mousa*.

Born from ancient Greek mythology, the Muses were inspirational goddesses of literature, science, and the arts. There were nine Olympian Muses, with enchanting names such as Clio, Thalia, and Terpsichore, and they were considered the source of knowledge, as embodied in poetry, lyrical songs, and myths passed down orally from the period.

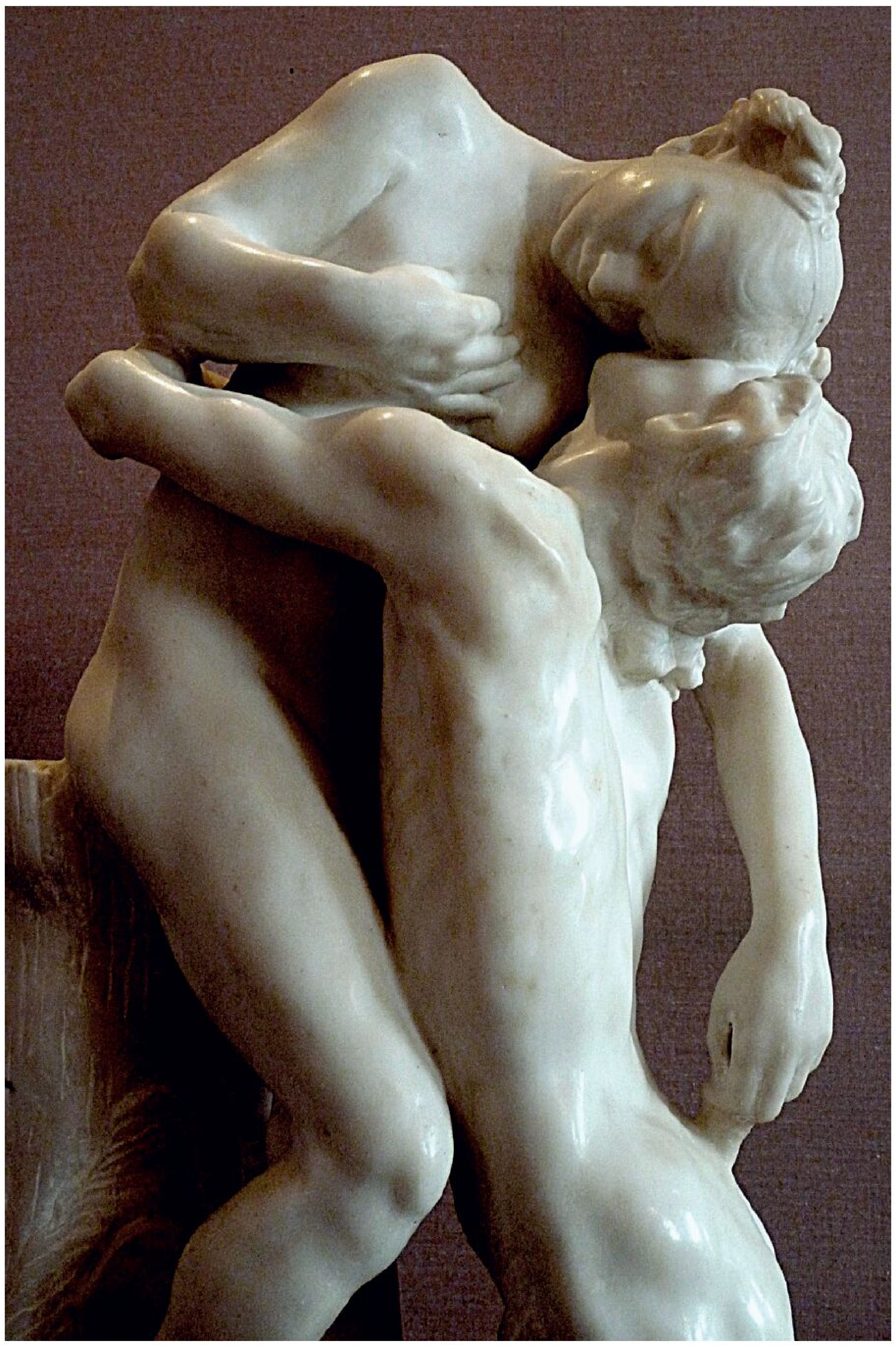
Writers and artists in ancient Greece called on the Muses when embarking on a creative work. In the *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, author Homer asks the Muses to help him tell the story in the best way. In paintings, they were depicted as divine creatures of ethereal beauty. During the Enlightenment in 17th- and 18th-century Europe, the word "museum" – which comes from "cult place of the Muses" – came to mean a public display of knowledge. Today, a muse is commonly seen as being a wellspring of artistic inspiration. And while a muse can be of any gender, they've traditionally been considered female.

'We might traditionally think of "a muse" as a woman,' says writer Sophie Haydock, 'but a muse can be anything that inspires a greater state of connection and creativity – a place, a feeling, or something fleeting.' The muse in all her glory is a creature Sophie has lived with intimately for some years. Her debut novel, *The Flames*, was published in 2022 and chronicles the stories of four real-life muses who inspired Austrian expressionist painter Egon Schiele in the early 20th century. Far from being the languid, dreamy figure of myth, Sophie concludes that muses are deeply creative, active, and influential. 'A muse is the spark that lights the match of creativity,' she says. 'They are not passive in my opinion, they're someone who not only inspires greatness but actively contributes towards it. It's a very symbiotic process between model and artist.'

Shared inspiration

A muse can spring from any walk of life across the globe, just as they can be found in every creative context, be it literature, architecture, fashion, or dance. In her book, *The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women and the Artists They Inspired*, Francine Prose discusses the life of prima ballerina Suzanne Farrell (pictured below with influential choreographer George Balanchine). Working with Balanchine in the 1950s and 60s, Suzanne created masterpieces of modern ballet. Though she was known as the 'Balanchine ballerina par excellence', Suzanne is seen by Francine as 'a true collaborator… physically capable of doing things none of the other dancers could do'. Francine adds: 'Once Suzanne came along, Balanchine's world could take a turn it hadn't been able to take before. She was very, very self-determined.' They danced the starring roles in his modern version of *Don Quixote*. It made her a star, and it was a partnership made in heaven – at least, until she fell in love with a fellow dancer, and her professional relationship with Balanchine fell apart. So, while she inspired him, it was a two-way process.

The same could be said about Yoko Ono and John Lennon, although debate still rages over the level of influence that the Japanese multimedia artist and peace activist had over her husband's musical output while they were together. Yet it can't be disputed that Yoko was an artist of considerable status and repute before she met John, nor that she continues to be successful long after his murder in 1980.



(*Above, left*) *Sakuntala* (*Vertumnus et Pomona*), 1886-1905 Camille Claudel. (*Above, right*) Sculptors Camille (on the left) and Jessie Lipscomb in their Paris studio in the mid-1880s

Shared role

Some muses are not exclusive, but one of many. This was true of the inspiring women in the life of Spanish artist Picasso. His relationship with muses began in 1904, with Fernande Olivier, artist, model, and subject of more than 60 of Picasso's portraits. Russian ballet dancer Olga Khokhlova came next. The pair married and she is said to have inspired his cubist phase. Then there was Marie-Thérèse Walter, who was 17 when Picasso fell in love with her (his secretly painted erotic portraits of the young model were a sign to Olga of his infidelity). Surrealist photographer Dora Maar followed; then artist Françoise Gilot, in 1943. Finally, in 1953, came Jacqueline Roque, the last of his muses and the one who remained with him the longest, inspiring over 400 of his paintings; she was 26, he 71. Being Picasso's muse was not always a happy role, even in the artist's estimation. His biographer, art historian John Richardson, wrote: 'It must be painful, Picasso would say with more pride than guilt, for a woman to watch herself transformed into a monster, or fade from his work, while a new favourite materialises in all her glory.'

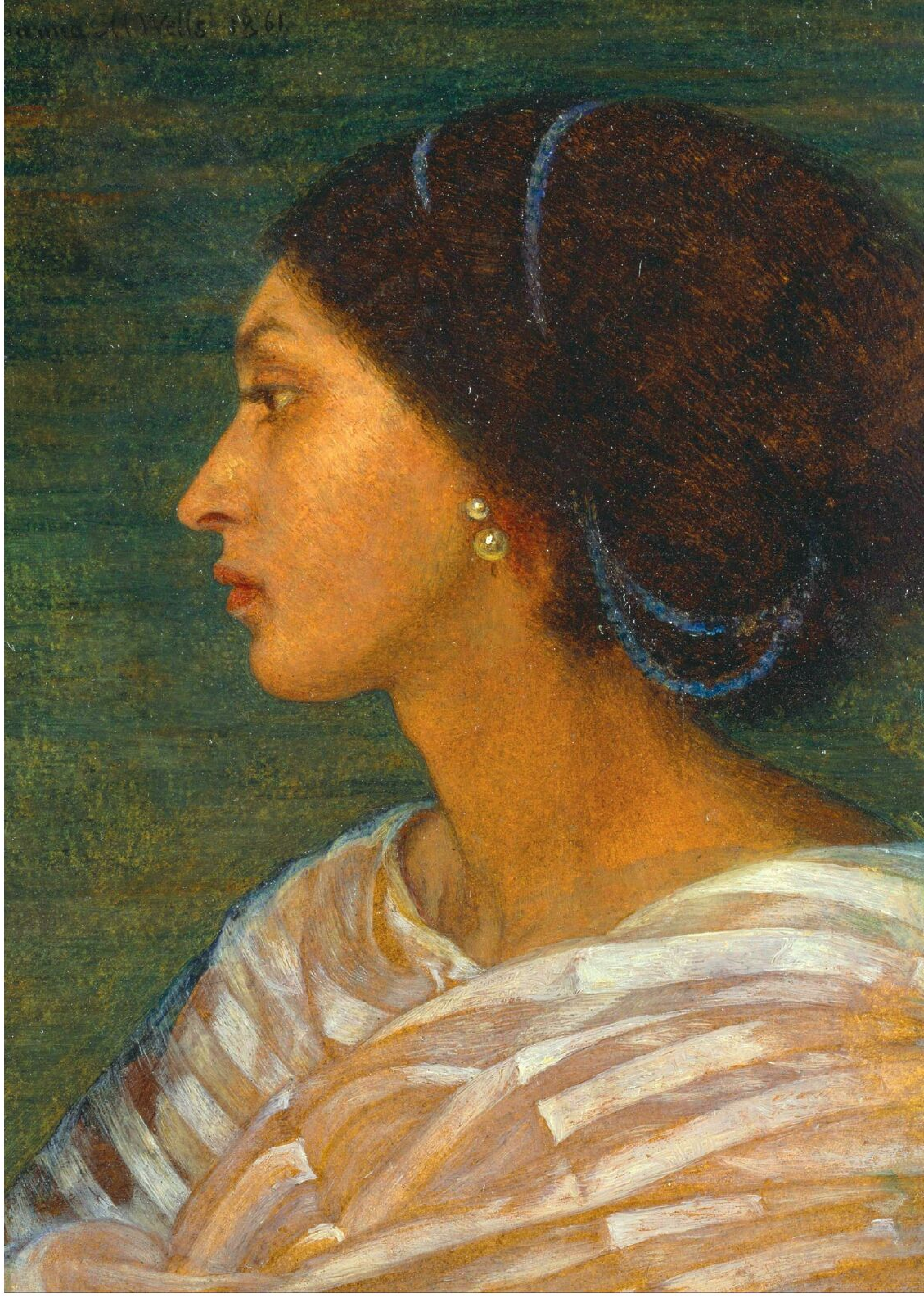
Today, the contribution these women made to Picasso's work is being more fully appreciated. Writer and editor Ellen Millard notes: 'In documenting Picasso's life, his muses proved invaluable. Along with Gilot and Olivier's memoirs, Khokhlova and Walter kept extensive archives of photographs and letters, while Maar's own works provided a visual picture.' Just as they obsessed over him, so too was he dependent on them: 'Each relationship represented a new era of work, and a further development in his style. In remembering the greatest artist of the 20th century, it pays to consider not just the man, but the women who made him.'

Belated recognition

Some muses, including those mentioned here, have been prodigious talents in their own right. Nonetheless, they have been overshadowed by the more famous figures with whom they were associated. As greater awareness of sexism – and discrimination of all kinds in the writing of history – helps to reframe and redress injustices, the world is finally giving credit to talents who've been woefully unrecognised. The list of muses who were also creative is long. A few in fine art include Kiki de Montparnasse and Lee Miller, both muses to photographer Man Ray, and Georgia O'Keeffe, who for many years was overshadowed by her fellow artist and partner, Alfred Stieglitz.

Words: **Beverley D'Silva**

PHOTOGRAPHS: PICRYL.COM; (*THE KISS* PAGE 86) RAWPIXEL.COM



SOME OF THE FINEST MUSES IN FINE ART

Joanna Hiffernan (1843–1886)

James McNeill Whistler's portrait, *Woman in White*, was hailed a masterpiece in 1863. It sealed his career success. His model, Joanna Hiffernan, was 17 when she met 26-year-old Whistler. He was smitten by her red hair, 'the most beautiful you've ever seen!' he wrote. He was from a wealthy, educated US family, hers was a working-class Irish background. Even after their romance ended, they remained close all her life. She cared for his son from an affair, managed his estate, and posed for his best portraits. More than 130 years after her death, a book was published about Joanna and Whistler, and a major exhibition, in 2022 at London's Royal Academy, honoured her life.

Frida Kahlo (1907–1954)

Mexican artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera had 10 years of emotionally turbulent wedded life from 1929. He was the more famous during their lifetime but, after her death in 1954, Frida's status surpassed his. Today, she's celebrated for her striking self-portraits as well as representing Mexican national and indigenous cultures. The pair were mutual muses; her style personal and expressive, his public and monumental. Their status switch can be seen in sales of their art. His 1931 painting, *The Rivals*, sold for US$9.7 million, a record in 2018 for a Latin American artwork. But the figure was surpassed by the sale of Frida's *Diego and I* (1949), which depicts her tearful self with his head stamped on her forehead. It sold in November 2021 for US$34.9 million, trumping his price by over three-and-a-half times.

Dora Maar (1907–1997)

An accomplished surrealist photographer, painter, and poet, Dora Maar documented Depression-era America in the late 1920s. She met Picasso in 1935 and became his lover and muse for about 10 years. She was also the only person allowed to document him as he painted his epic work *Guernica*. She inspired some of his most famous paintings, such as *Portrait of Dora Maar* and *Weeping Woman*, both created in 1937. When he left her for Françoise Gilot in 1943, she suffered a nervous breakdown. Afterwards, she devoted more time to painting and turned to Catholicism, explaining: 'After Picasso, only God.'

Fanny Eaton (1835–1924)

Fanny was born in Jamaica, a year after the abolition of slavery. It's thought that her mother, who was of African descent, was born into slavery on the island and that Fanny's father was a British soldier. She and her mother migrated to Britain in the 1840s. Fanny worked as a domestic servant before marrying a horse-cab driver and going on to have 10 children. Her striking looks captivated Pre-Raphaelite painters such as John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who posed her in his painting *The Beloved* (1865–1886). Fanny helped redefine Victorian standards of beauty, and inspired great art, such as Joanna Boyce Wells' 1861 painting *Head of a Mulatto Woman* (*Mrs Eaton*) (above).

Emilie Louise Flöge (1874–1952)

In 1918, when the Austrian painter Gustav Klimt was dying, his final words, allegedly, were: 'Call for Emilie!' His muse – and companion for decades – was also a prominent member of the Vienna Secession and an avant-garde fashion designer with a loyal following. She contributed to the feminist dress reform movement, which aimed to liberate women from the corset, and is featured in many of Klimt's paintings wearing her own designs. Experts believe his most famous work, *The Kiss* (1907–1908) (pictured page 86) depicts the artist and Emilie as lovers.

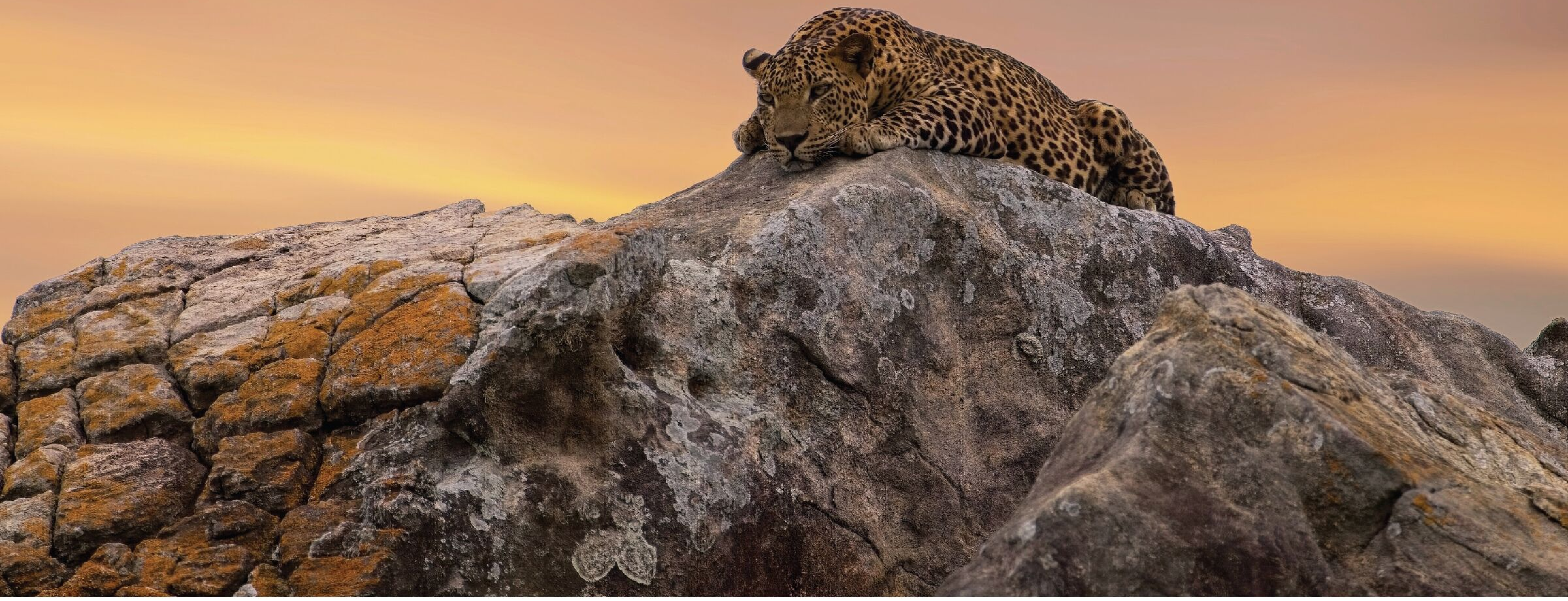
ESCAPING

'Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all'

Helen Keller

Beneath Banyan skies

The beautiful Indian Ocean isle of Sri Lanka is home to ancient palaces, spiritual shrines, a dazzling array of wildlife, and ecolodges that offer a peaceful escape into the wilderness



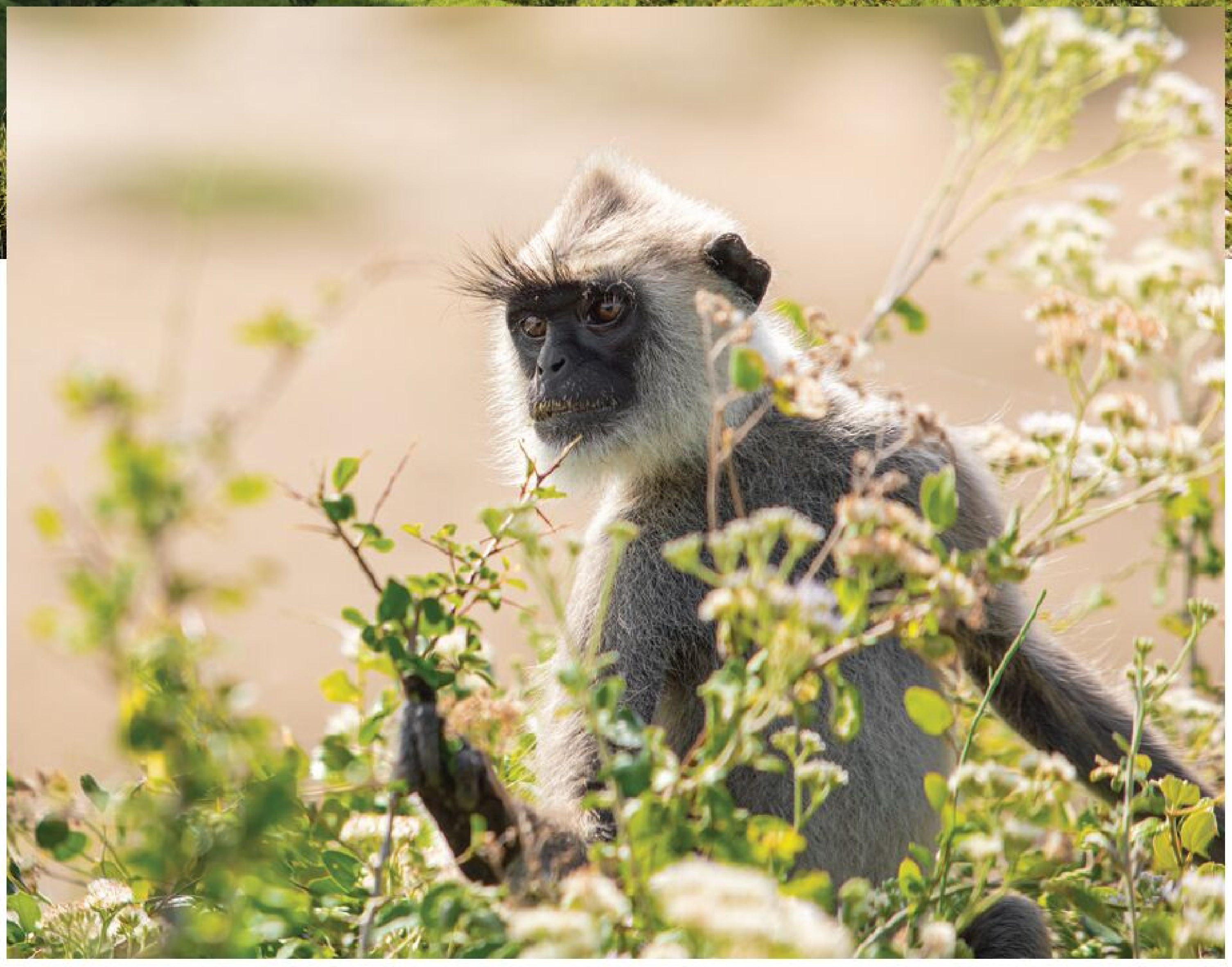
Iridescent little green bee-eaters take to the sky as our land cruiser rumbles along the amber trails inside Yala National Park. The emerald birds shimmer in the sun, bright turquoise throats capturing the colour of the sky as they flash through shrub forests of ironwood, their delicate wings elegantly unfolding like fans to catch the wind.

Yala is one of the precious jewels on the South Asian island of Sri Lanka. Known as the "Teardrop of India", the country lies in the Indian Ocean, just 55 kilometres off its neighbour's south-east coast. Yet it has an identity of its own, a distinct language (Sinhalese), culture, and cuisine, and a billion fewer people, allowing life to flow at a less frenetic pace. Even here, in the island's most-visited park, it's possible to enjoy moments alone and vistas with no trace of human life. What's to be found is a wild wonderland, teeming with animals including elephants, sloth bears, jackals, buffalo, and one of the world's most elusive big cats: the leopard.

The national park, which covers around 985 square kilometres, is home to one of the highest densities of leopards on the planet, and in Yala – which comprises a variety of ecosystems, including moist and dry monsoon forests, grasslands, marshes, marine wetlands, and sandy beaches – they find the perfect retreat, with herds of spotted and sambar deer providing ample prey.

Sri Lanka is the perfect destination for an adventure. Travellers find space and natural beauty in the country's invigorating national parks, including Yala, Bundala, Wilpattu, and Gal Oya, and wonder at the huge diversity of animals that call them home. Jungle lodges and oceanside resorts provide room to relax and time to dream. Historic sites, such as the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, along with the soaring rock fortress of Sigiriya, lift the spirits, while meditative Buddhist and Hindu temple sites offer sanctuary to quieten busy minds. Zingy curries put some spice in your life and a spring in your step, Ayurvedic wellness retreats soothe body and soul, and expert guides inform, enlighten, and ensure that your trip's a breeze.

Watched by a kitty of the domestic kind, I prepare for my Yala safari with a belt-busting brunch of Sri Lanka's legendary string hoppers, coconut pol sambol, daal, and fresh fruits at nearby glamping retreat, Tribe Yala. Secluded in the forest, 25 minutes from the national park, the camp offers jeep safaris, lake tours, cave trekking, and bush walks. Luxe tents, including one with its own treehouse, offer comfort and calm in the wilderness, with grey langurs swinging in the trees and parakeets swooping above the plunge pools. The restaurant surveys a naturally photogenic slab of rock, perfect for candlelight dining. The trails leading to each tent serve as wildlife corridors after dark, used by rare pangolins, sloth bears, and even leopards, and illuminated by fireflies, while constellations light up the skies.



Entering Yala, expectation is high. The camp's head wildlife ranger and general manager, Marlon Buultjens, scans the landscape, seeking out the island's unique animals, and sharing his passion and knowledge for each one. 'There! A monkey tree!' Marlon smiles, as he points to a bush commandeered by a troop of Hanuman, or tufted grey langurs. Monkeys sit on every branch, skittishly nibbling leaves, like wise old men with snow-white beards, eyeing us suspiciously. 'Langurs are definitely on the menu for leopards, so they're always alert,' says Marlon. To help them evade becoming a meal for the big cat, the monkeys team up with spotted deer, in a symbiotic relationship. The deer benefit by eating leaves dislodged by the monkeys, and with more eyes and ears on the ground, danger is easier to spot. If either species sees a leopard, they let out an alarm call and dash off.

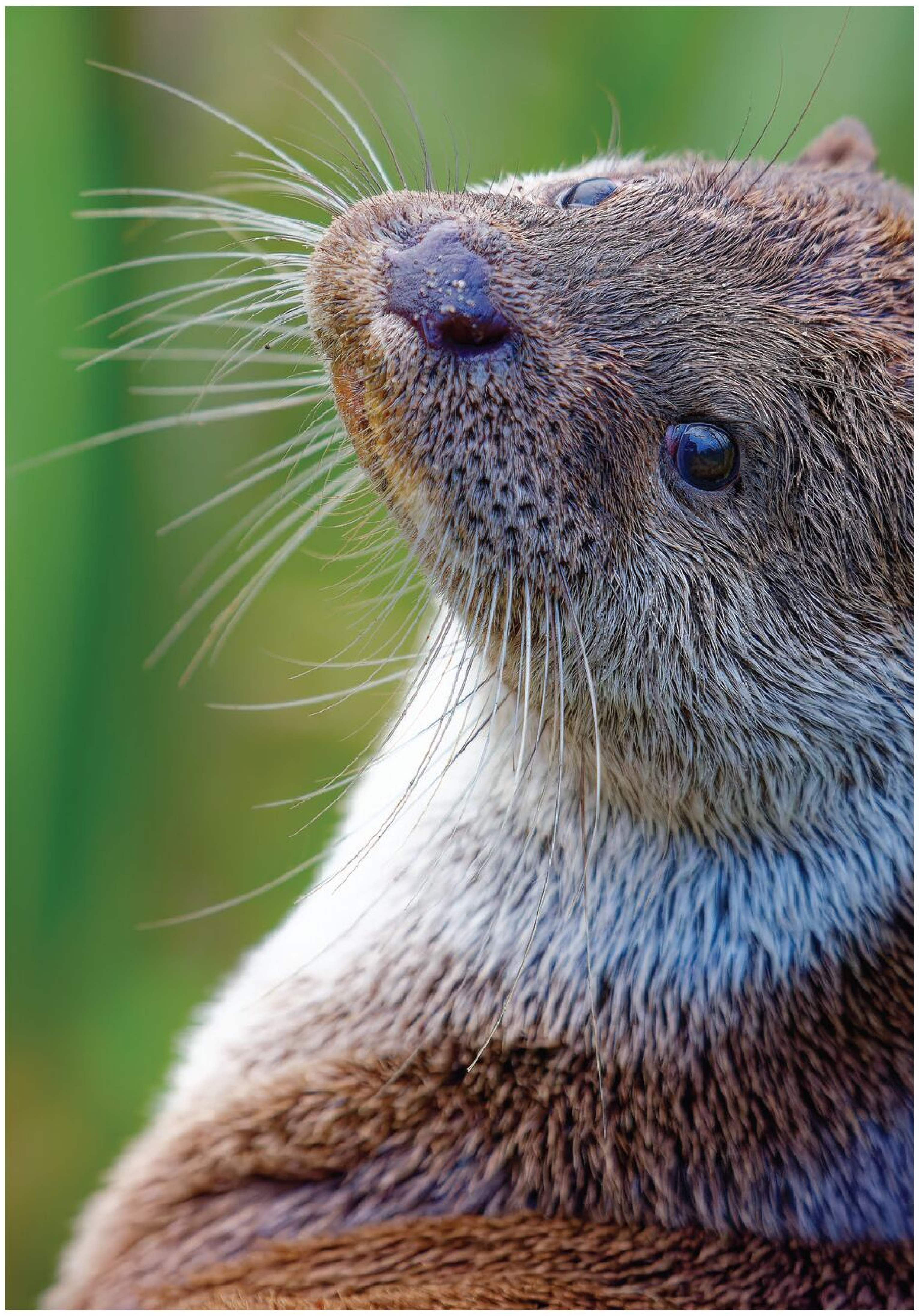
These alarm calls also alert the safari guides, indicating that an elusive leopard may be close by and helping to deliver the ultimate Yala wildlife sighting for their guests. Driving a few kilometres on, we're in luck. Deer calls have hinted that a cat may be close, and approaching the area cautiously, we see two distinctly feline ears peeping up from behind a bush. As the vehicle is manoeuvred for a better view, a young leopard is revealed: sublimely beautiful, regal and rare, with amber eyes, a chocolate velvet nose, and perhaps the most mesmerising markings of all the big cats: a coat so coveted, people are willing to kill for it.

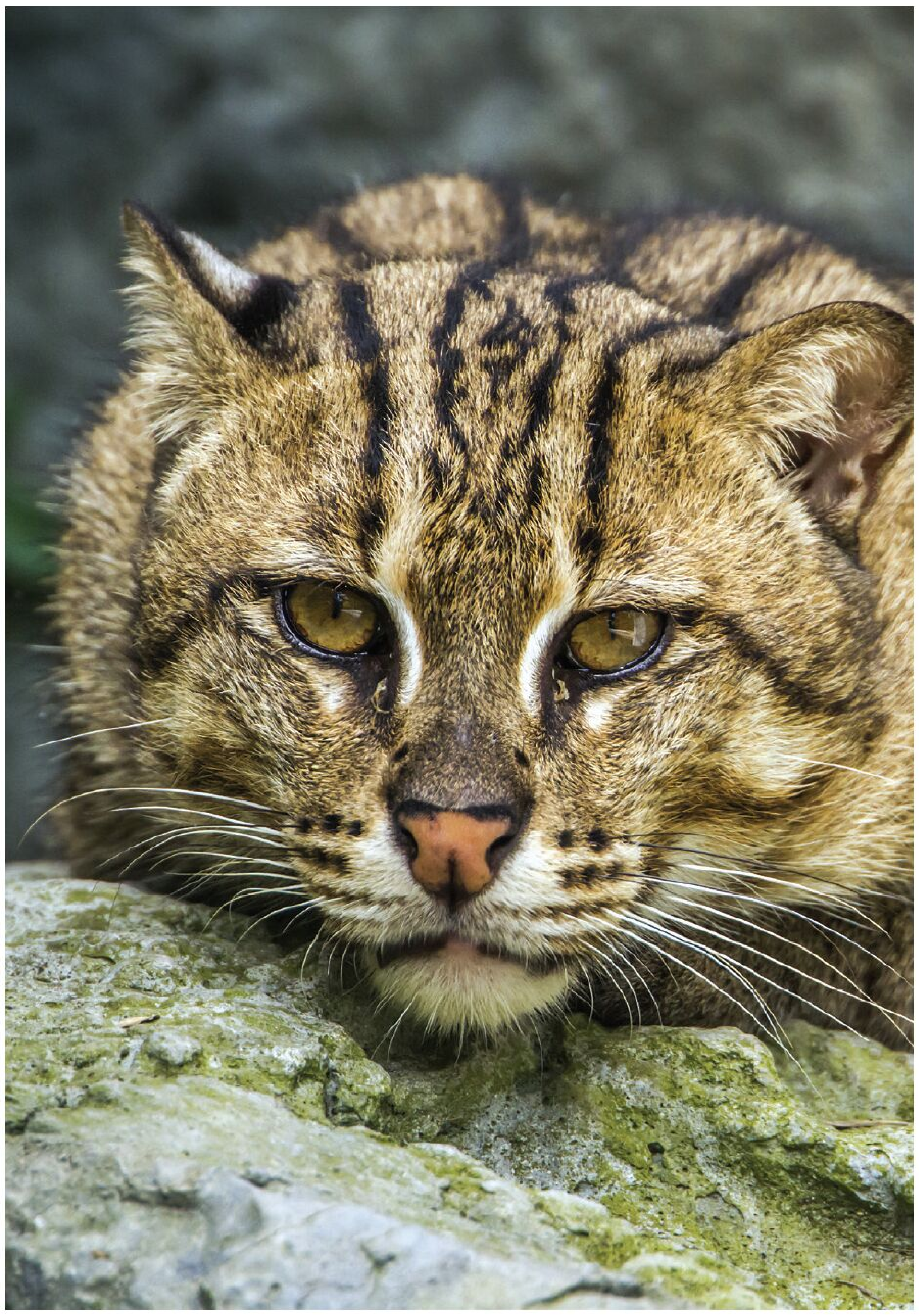
Thousands of leopards once roamed across Sri Lanka but, after coming under British rule in the early 1800s, Ceylon – as the island was known until becoming an independent republic in 1972 – lost huge areas of forest: leopard habitat that was cleared to make way for rubber, tea, and coffee plantations. Roads and railways were built, and trophy hunting became a popular pastime for plantation owners, with elephants and leopards targeted for ivory and skins. In the 1960s and 70s, the big cats were killed for their beautiful coats for the fashion industry. Despite legal measures to protect them, they remain highly prized adornments for the walls of the wealthy today.

Leopards have lost a staggering 75 percent of their historical range across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia in the past 250 years, with economic development and population growth drastically impacting habitats and biodiversity. Now, as in many countries, Sri Lanka's apex predators are largely isolated in patches of wild land – islands of biodiversity surrounded by farmlands, villages, cities, and highways. Straying beyond these havens, as Sri Lanka's leopards often do, can be deadly. Human-wildlife conflict frequently leads to the predators' demise, with some farmers resorting to poisoning leopards in retaliation for attacks on their livestock. Listed as vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, it's estimated that fewer than 800 Sri Lankan leopards remain in the wild.

Sri Lanka's Wildlife and Nature Protection Society (WNPS), which helped to establish Yala and Wilpattu National Parks, has set up six research centres and launched a multi-regional monitoring system of camera traps and surveys to learn more about the leopards and how they are being impacted by habitat loss and climate change, and to try to reduce human-wildlife conflict. The country's Wilderness & Wildlife Conservation Trust is also working with the government on conservation initiatives and, through The Leopard Project, monitoring how land use is affecting big cats. While southern populations are fairly well studied, little is known about leopards in the north of the island, which was out of bounds for many years because of the civil war, which ended in 2009. Largely nocturnal and solitary in nature, these skilled hunters are vital for maintaining healthy ecosystems, but for them to survive and thrive, deforestation must be halted and land that has been lost restored.

Along with the leopard, Sri Lanka is home to three other wild-cat species: the fishing cat, jungle cat, and rusty-spotted cat, and all four roam Jetwing Vil Uyana resort, a rewilded wonderland close to the ancient rock fortress of Sigiriya (above). A UNESCO World Heritage site, this symbolic monument rises 180 metres from the forest floor and 349 metres above sea level, with a dizzying number of steps taking visitors to the summit. Up here, in 480 CE, King Kashyapa I created a palace, with a city and citadel surrounding Sigiriya rock. The 360-degree views from the top, and stunning 1,600-year-old frescoes of celestial nymphs midway up, are well worth the steamy climb.





Sigiriya lies within Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle – the island's ancient Rajarata, or Land of Kings – a region rich with archaeological treasures from early Sinhalese civilisation. This triangle covers the north-central plains and stretches between Anuradhapura, the first ancient capital to the north with its vast ruined temples and dagobas (Buddhist shrines holding sacred relics); Polonnaruwa to the east, the second royal city known for its well-preserved ruins, Buddhist statues, and troops of grey langurs and toque macaques studied by researchers at the Smithsonian Primate Research Station; and Kandy to the south, home to the revered Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, which holds a tooth of Gautama Buddha. Within the triangle lie some of the country's most sacred sites, including the Buddhist cave temples of Dambulla and Aluvihara.

A sanctuary for wildlife and travellers, Vil Uyana provides a beautiful base to explore these ancient realms. Meaning 'the garden of lakes' in Sinhalese, Vil Uyana is proof that if land is surrendered back to nature, animals will return, too. Once barren and over-farmed agricultural land, the resort's 28 acres were selected for an ambitious rewilding project in 2003 and now support a flourishing, nature-rich wetland, humming with life.

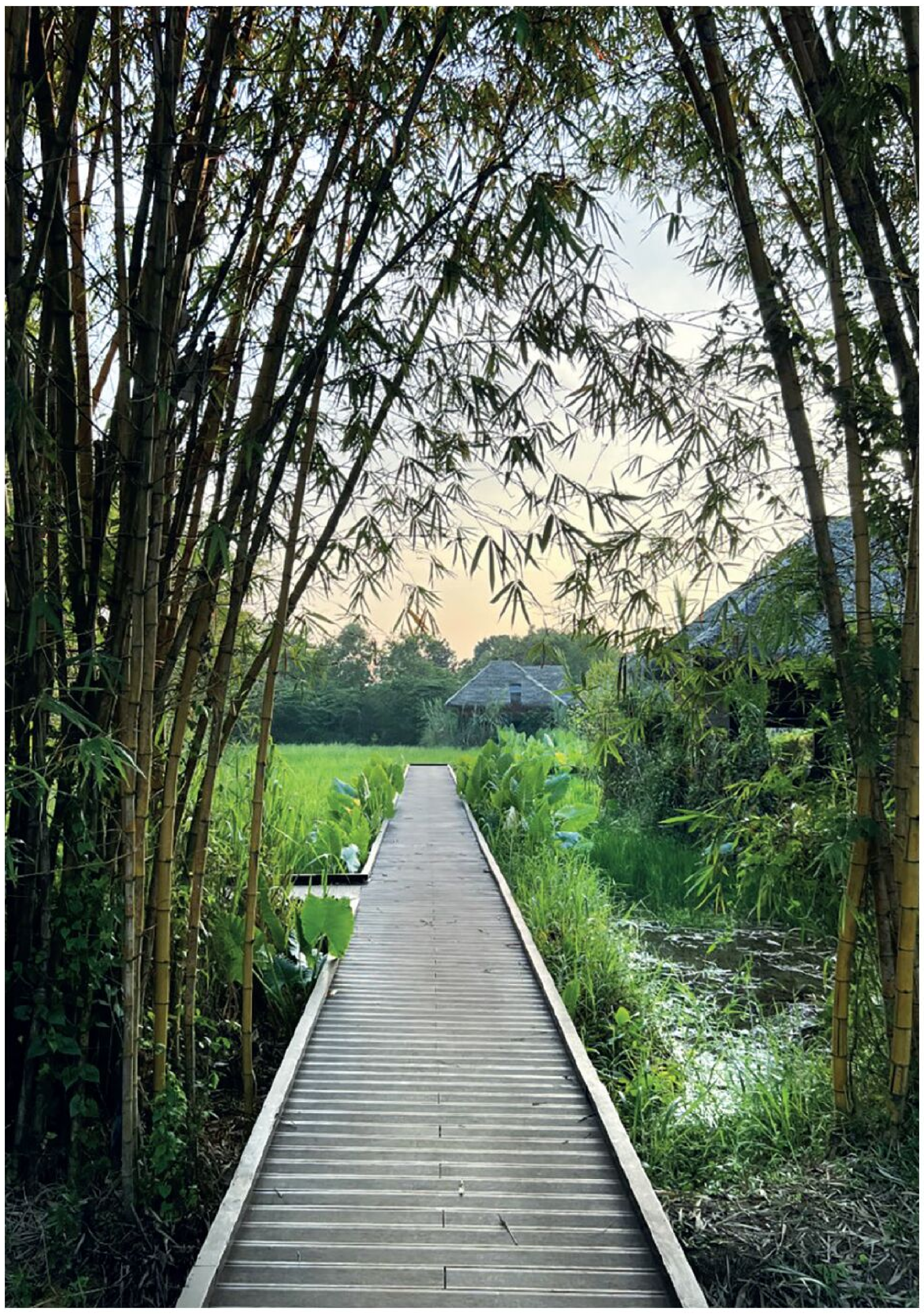
The transformation has attracted more than 20 mammal species, including Eurasian otters, ring-tailed civets, and spotted chevrotain, or mouse deer. Vil Uyana has also become a vital stronghold for the endangered grey slender loris, first seen there in 2010, with resident naturalist, Chaminda Jayasekara, spearheading the Loris Conservation Project, to help protect the nocturnal primate, which can be seen foraging for berries and insects along the resort's moonlit wildlife trail. A marsh or mugger crocodile also hangs out in the lake, overlooked by the raised waterside Apsara restaurant and bar. Nothing beats sipping your morning coffee with a crocodile, as the sun spreads its gold across the sky.

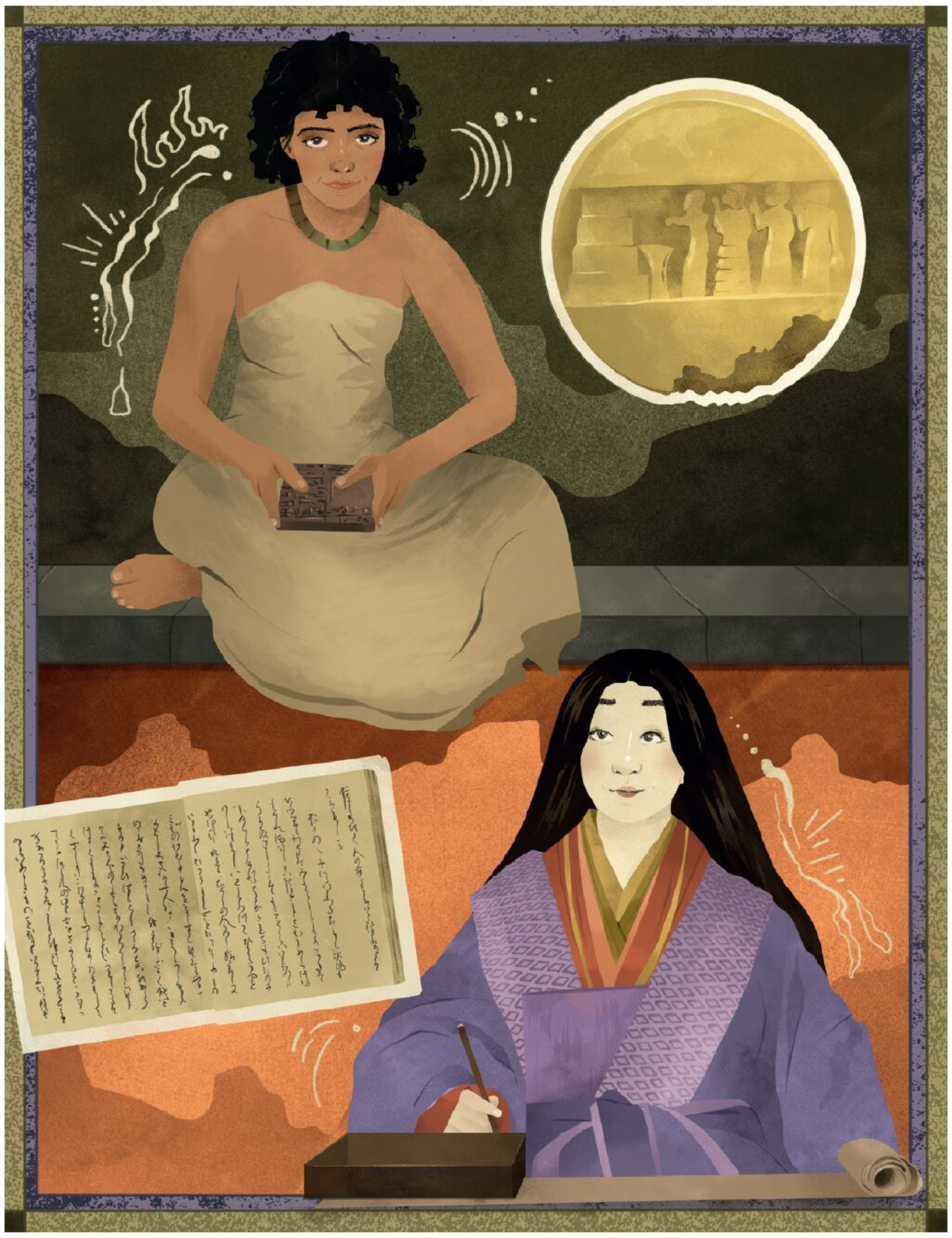
Five hours by road from the capital of Colombo, the retreat is a birder's paradise, too, visited by more than 120 species, including kingfishers darting over the lake and hornbills swooping between the trees. At night, bats emerge to feast on the myriad insect species that thrive amid the marshes and reeds. Walking along the raised wooden boardwalk to my villa, one of 36 dwellings constructed on stilts throughout the marshes, forests, gardens, and organic paddy fields, I'm greeted by wild peacocks. One strutting ahead to my room, the most flamboyant doorman I've ever met. The other perched on the thatched roof, an ornately painted weather vane, which I discover doubles as an alarm clock at dawn.

Sri Lanka's wild spirit is alive in the island's national parks, but it dances beyond their boundaries, too. Visit this spellbinding country when you can, and always remember to look up.

Words: **Lauren Jarvis**

PHOTOGRAPHS: LAUREN JARVIS, SRI LANKA TOURISM





Novel beginnings

Some tales stand the test of time, offering fresh insights on age-old ideas. But where did this timeless art of storytelling first take shape?

As you curl up with the latest bestseller, you're playing a tiny part in a storytelling tradition that dates back hundreds, even thousands of years. For as long as humans have been able to communicate through pictures and then language, people have told stories. In the case of setting words down on paper, the first works of fiction significantly predate the invention of printing presses, and generations of early writers had their works copied out by hand. Today, it's easy to take paperbacks for granted – you can pick up a book in a department store or airport for less than the price of a café meal, or borrow them from a library for free. But some of the first works of fiction ever written were painstakingly copied out by monks, who spent their lives reproducing scripts, or only available to the very rich or royal. Many students of literature may be familiar with the works of writers such as Chaucer and Defoe, but in fact, historians argue that the contenders for the first novel are much older.

The world's first known author is widely considered to have been a princess and priestess living in ancient Mesopotamia – modern-day Iraq – in the 23rd century BCE. Enheduanna was a writer and poet who wrote several works of literature and hymns on clay tablets. However, her stories – and that of other very early scholars – tended to be based around religious beliefs, mythology, or philosophies. True fiction came along a little later, as writers in India, Japan, Greece, and Rome began to write longer stories with fictional narratives, intended to entertain.

One of the world's first novels is often said to be *The Tale of Genji*, written in 11th-century Japan by noblewoman and lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu. It tells a fictional tale of a character called Hikaru Genji, the son of an ancient Japanese emperor, who falls in love with his stepmother, Lady Fujitsubo, despite being married. The story follows Genji as, unhappy in his marriage and frustrated that he can't be with Lady Fujitsubo, he embarks on a series of love affairs. Written in archaic language, the original manuscript would be unreadable to the average Japanese speaker today, but it was translated into modern Japanese in the early 20th century. Another novel considered to be one of the world's first is *Kādambari*, written in 7th-century India by a father-and-son duo. The older author, Banabhatta, died before it was finished, so his son, Bhushanabhatta, wrote the book's second part, according to his father's plans. It's a romantic novel written in Sanskrit, with an intricate plot in which many of the characters appear in different incarnations, sometimes as humans and sometimes as demigods or animals. Standard editions of the original Sanskrit text are available to the modern reader, as well as English and Gujarati translations.

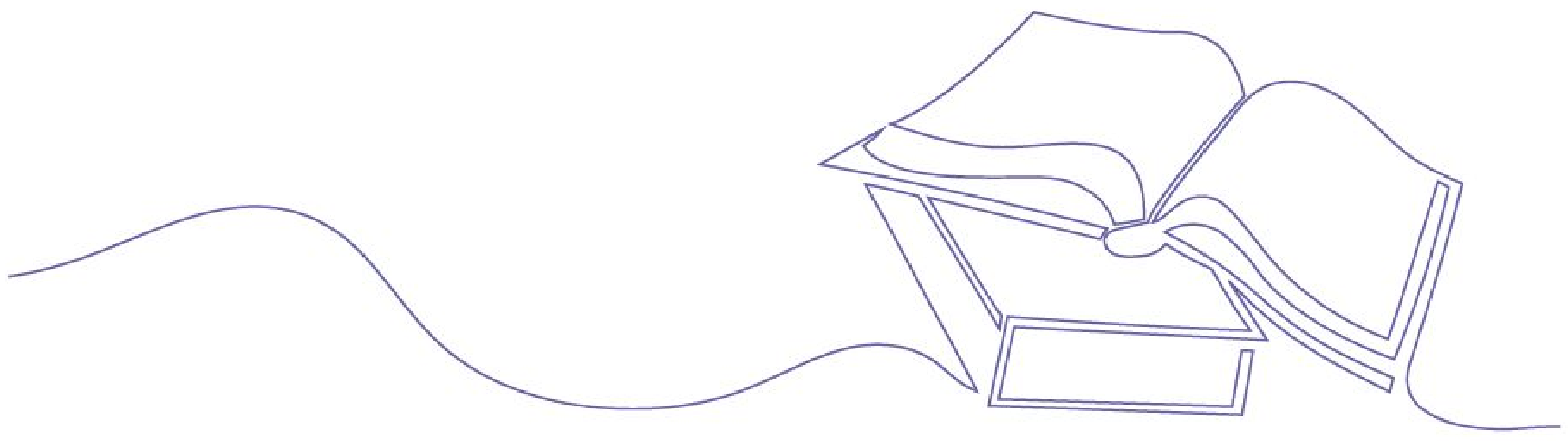
The earliest novels written in English came along much later. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was published in 1719 and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* seven years later. These books are often on school and university literature curriculums as the oldest novels written in English, but there are other contenders. In 1553, printer's assistant William Baldwin wrote *Beware the Cat*, an English satire set in the royal court of Tudor London that criticises religious practices and pompous forms of knowledge that aren't based on fact.

ILLUSTRATION: MICHELLE URRA

> *'Finally, from so little sleeping and so much reading, his brain dried up and he went completely out of his mind'*
>
> MIGUEL DE CERVANTES, *DON QUIXOTE*

It's divided into three parts based around a scholar who makes a potion that allows him to understand the secret language of cats. There's also the 15th-century *Le Morte d'Arthur* – a Middle-English story by Thomas Malory based on the legend of King Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, Merlin, and the Knights of the Round Table. And they may not have appeared at all had it not been for Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales,* plus other stories, written in the 1300s.

Reading classic literature and novels written many hundreds of years ago can feel challenging, with outdated language and grammar slowing you down, and potentially confusing archaic references and customs. But taking time to dip into stories written long ago provides a window to the past, immersing you in ancient cultures and making you rethink modern assumptions. They also help readers to see that some of the themes around being human – politics, relationships, communities, and follies – really are timeless, and the elements that made a good story hundreds of years ago are often the same as those that make an engrossing read today.



STEP BACK IN TIME

Four titles to try if you're inspired to venture into a different world...

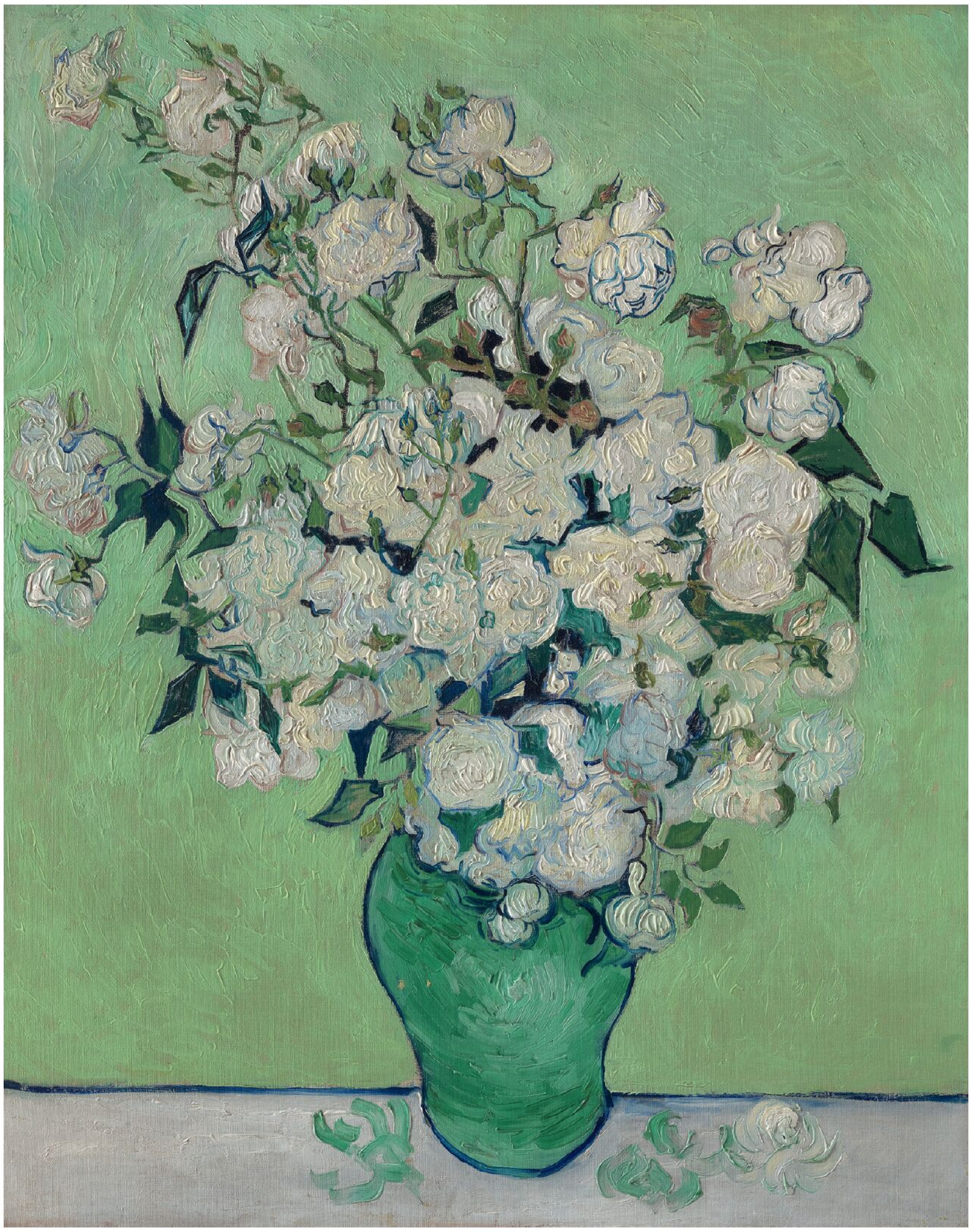
- ***Don Quixote.*** Another book often described as one of the first novels. Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes originally published *Don Quixote* in two parts, in 1605 and 1615. The plot follows the adventures of Don Quixote, a middle-aged gentleman of the lowest nobility from the La Mancha region, who becomes obsessed with chivalrous ideals in the books he reads and, after losing his mind (or perhaps pretending to), takes up his lance and sword to fight for justice, defend the helpless, and destroy the wicked. He becomes a wandering knight and his sometimes sad, sometimes funny adventures have become beloved by readers all over the world. In fact, *Don Quixote* is now one of the world's most translated books. Many of the knight's life lessons are still as relevant today as they were in the 17th century.

- ***The Guardian.*** This was the first novel published on mainland Australia (in 1838) and the first on the continent by a woman, although for many years its author, Anna Maria Bunn, remained anonymous and her identity was only revealed after an historian found a copy of the book in which her son had noted that his mother was the writer. The story is set in England and Ireland – where Bunn was born – and is partly told in the form of letters between two girls who had been friends at school. It begins as a romance but ends in tragedy, when husband and wife discover that they are, in fact, brother and sister. Themes include the search for security and whether to marry for love (which the author appears to frown upon).

- ***The Power of Sympathy.*** Written by William Hill Brown and published in 1789, this book is widely considered to be the first American novel. It follows the story of Thomas Harrington and Harriot Fawcett, who fall in love, which Thomas's father disapproves of. After the couple become engaged, a deep family secret is exposed – revealing that Harriot is actually Thomas's illegitimate half-sister. The story ends in tragedy, with Harriot falling victim to consumption and a grief-stricken Thomas ending his own life after her death. The novel was written as a commentary on the moral and social ideals of the time – with a preface that claims it is intended to 'expose the fatal consequences of seduction'. However, historians argue that 18th-century readers enjoyed it for the thrill of its taboo topics, rather than the moral lessons it was intended to bestow.

- ***The Blazing World.*** Written in England by the Duchess of Newcastle, Margaret Cavendish, and published in 1666, this is regarded as one of the first science-fiction novels. Set in a satirical, utopian kingdom that can be reached via the North Pole, the action is divided into three parts. The first "romancical" section describes a young woman being kidnapped and made Empress of the Blazing World; the second, more "philosophical" section explores her interest in natural sciences and discussions with leading scientists, philosophers, and academics of the Blazing World; and the third "fantastical" section follows her acting as a military leader during an invasion and seeing off the enemy. The heroine's adventures inspired a 2021 horror-thriller movie of the same name, and Margaret Cavendish is also celebrated as a pioneering female author – *The Blazing World* was the only work of its kind written by a woman at that time.

Words: **Jade Beecroft**



Always in bloom

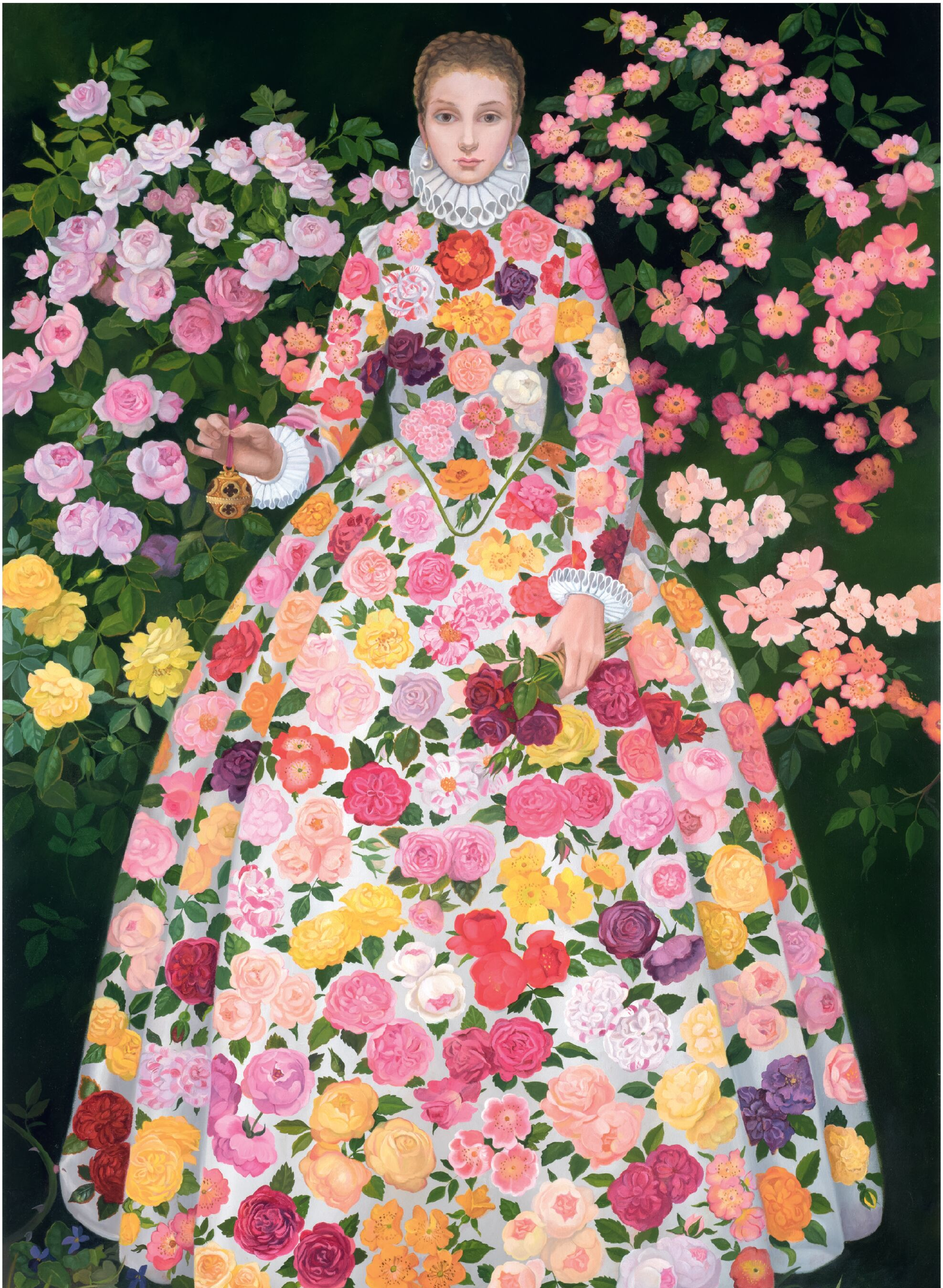
Roses have long inspired artists with their beauty and symbolism, standing as one of nature's most timeless and evocative muses

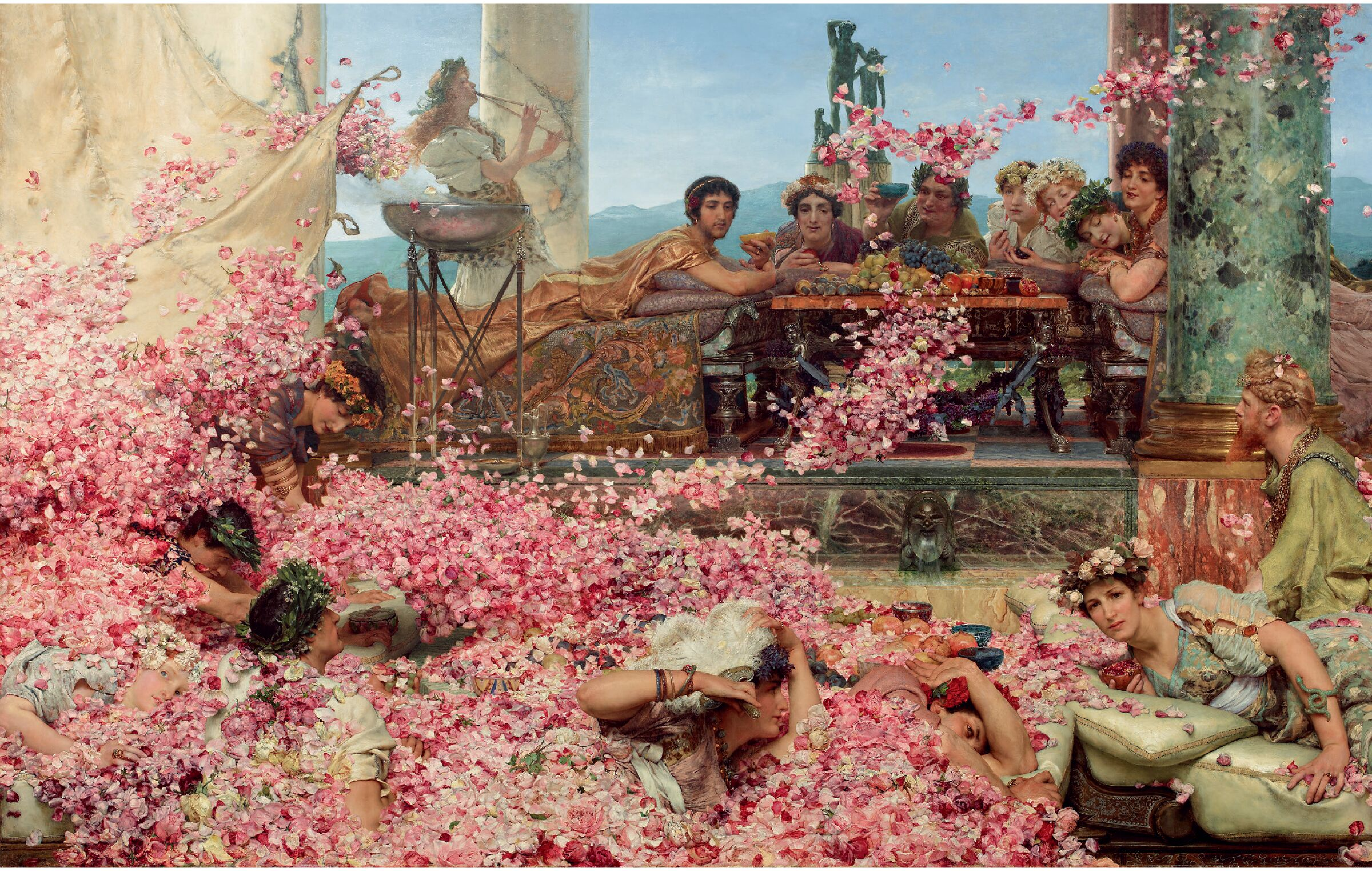
***Roses*, 1890**
Vincent van Gogh
Oil on canvas

This floral still life of pale pink roses in a green vase is one of a series that Van Gogh produced just before the end of his yearlong stay at the Saint-Rémy asylum. In his distinctive style and impasto technique, bold blue lines define sections of the composition, contrasting with the softness of the flowers. Spent petals and dried leaves rest on the tabletop, a reminder of the bouquet's ephemerality.

***The Rose Dress*, 2021**
Lizzie Riches
Oil on canvas

This striking painting was specially commissioned by French perfume house Fragonard. A modern reinterpretation of a traditional Elizabethan portrait, it shows a young woman dressed in an ornate 16th-century-style gown, complete with collared ruff and large teardrop earrings of shiny pearls. Each rose on the dress is unique, from wild red roses to Centifolias in full bloom in an array of hues.



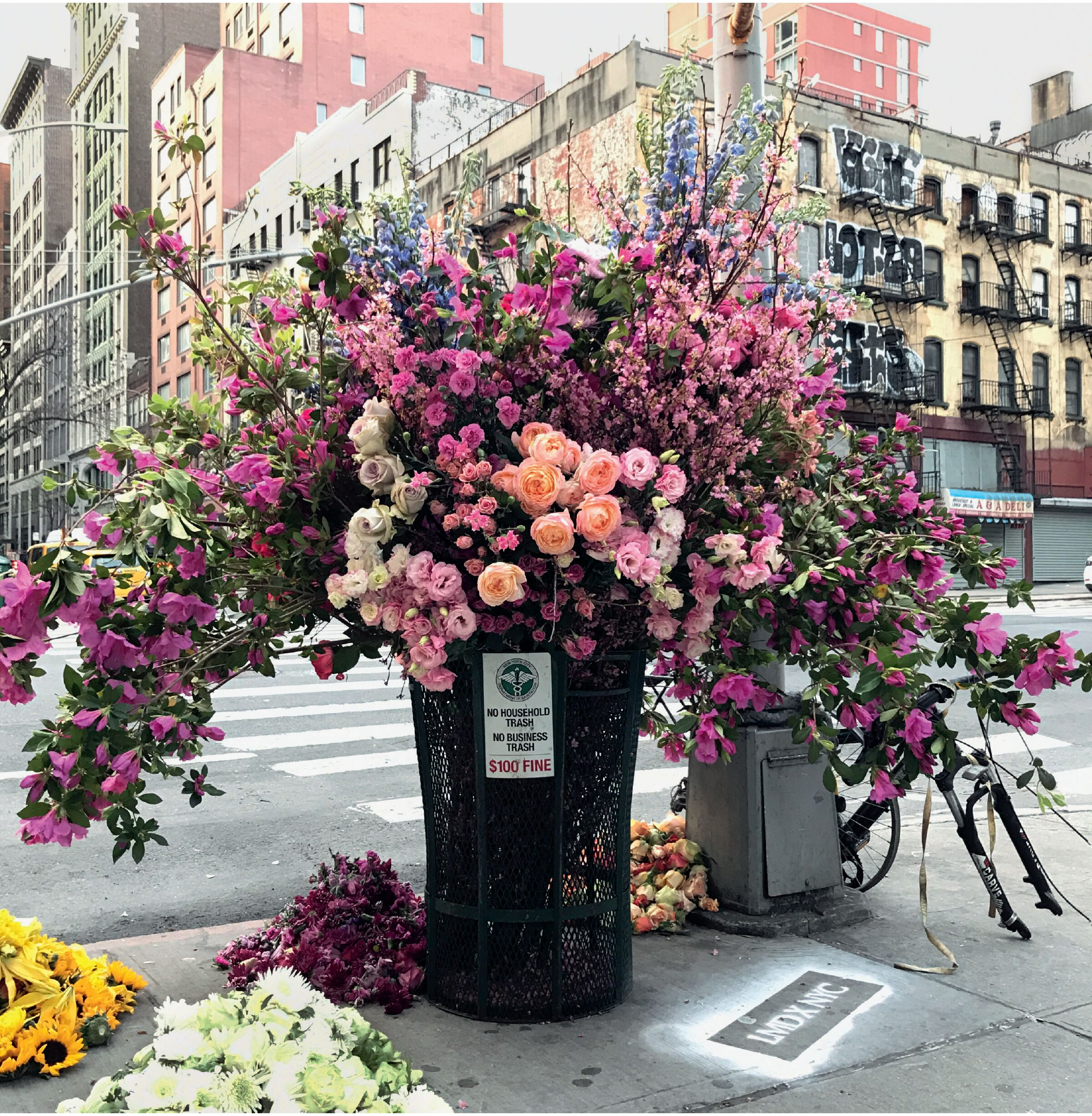


Arrangement, 2023
Natasja Sadi
Sugar flowers and fresh roses

This stunning arrangement is as rich and dramatic as any Dutch still-life painting. Yet each bloom in this photograph is edible, made entirely from sugar. Sadi has mastered the sculpting and colouring of cultivars at all stages; from buds and blossoms to wilting and decaying petals, each is rendered with remarkable verisimilitude. Her art runs deeper than simply celebrating the beauty of flowers. For Sadi, her sugar sculptures honour her African and Indonesian ancestors, who laboured as slaves and contract workers on the sugar cane plantations of Suriname, a former Dutch colony in South America. ‘Creating sugar flowers and floral arrangements in the Dutch style has been one way of breaking uncomfortable habits of silence,’ reflected Sadi.

The Roses of Heliogabalus, 1888
Lawrence Alma-Tadema
Oil on canvas

According to the *Historia Augusta*, Emperor Heliogabalus had a banqueting room with a reversible ceiling that could be turned to shower flowers on the guests. The story goes that he once rained down so many petals, “that some were actually smothered to death, being unable to crawl out to the top.” Lawrence Alma-Tadema caused a sensation when he exhibited *The Roses of Heliogabalus* in 1888. Its colours, its unorthodox composition, and the blank, affectless faces of the guests puzzled viewers, with *The Observer* reporting, “the girls smothering under the rose leaves do not seem to mind”. Did the painting portray an amusing prank or a sadistic exercise in murder? The second interpretation became standard, and many were outraged by the lack of morals the artwork displayed.


NO HOUSEHOLD TRASH
NO BUSINESS TRASH
$100 FINE
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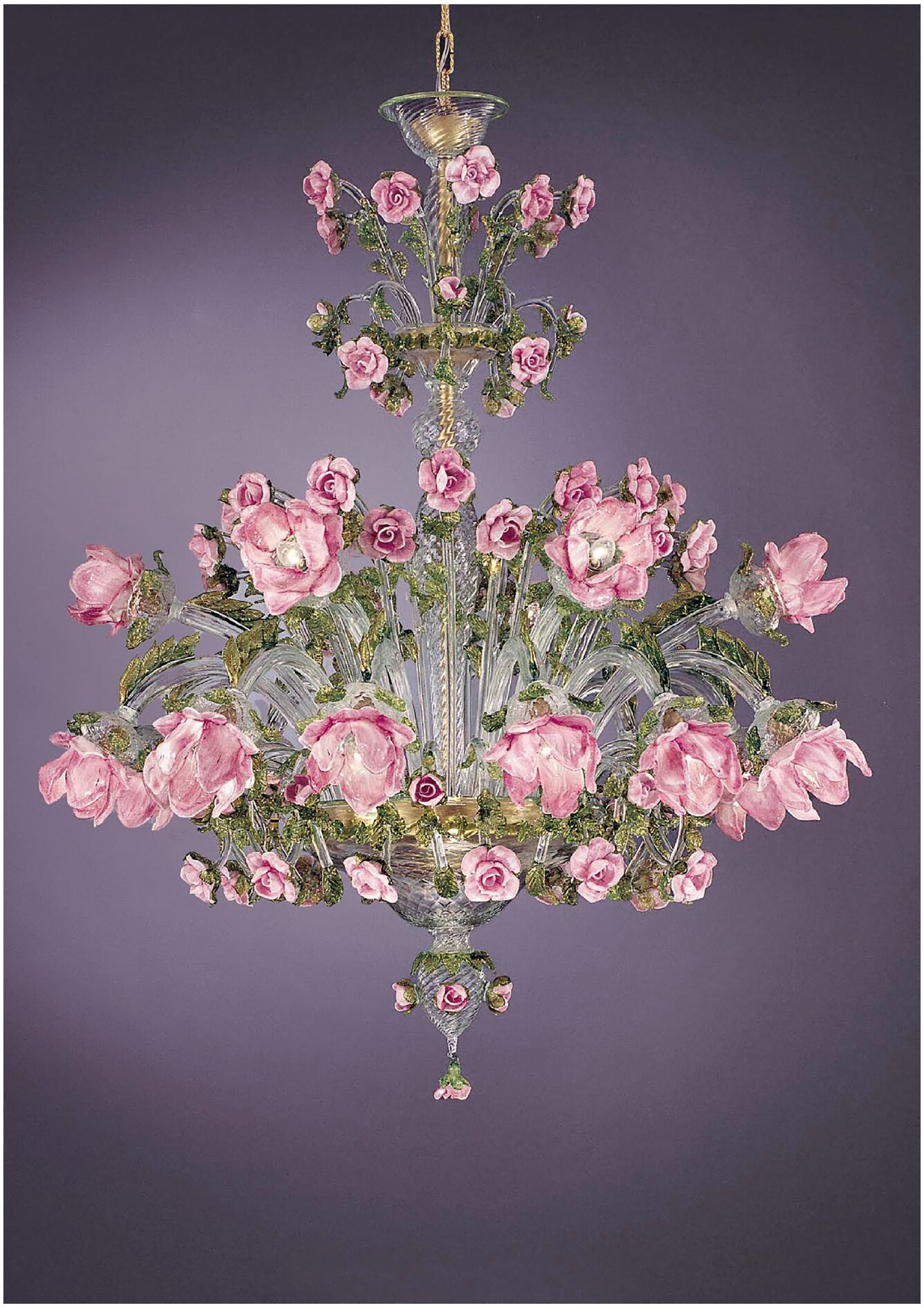
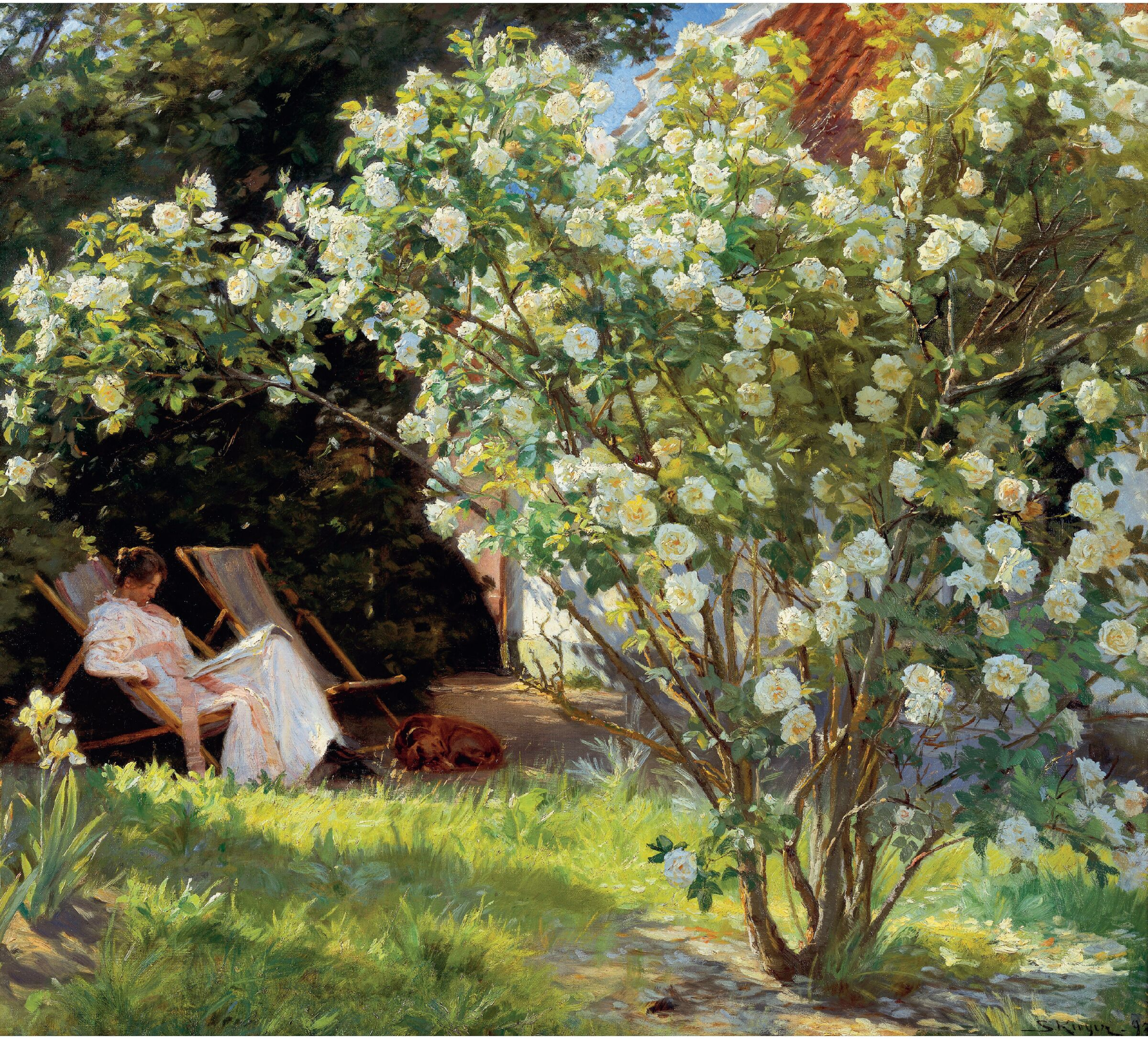


Flower Flash, 2019
Lewis Miller
Floral installation

The rubbish bins of New York can hardly be described as attractive. This photograph captures the explosion of colour that greeted passersby on the corner of West 22nd Street and 7th Avenue in Chelsea one bright spring morning. An abundance of pink, white, and peach-coloured roses at the heart of the display are accompanied by an array of seasonal flowers, while more roses lie on the footpath. The arrangements, installed secretly and without permission from the city, are created before dawn. Miller and his team work fast, using leftover blooms from his floral-design company.

Rosai Chandelier, c. 2020
Carrara Glassmakers
Glass

A large salon in a Venetian palace overlooking the Grand Canal is perhaps the most suitable setting for this spectacular rose chandelier. This floral light fixture was handmade on the neighbouring island of Murano by the factory Carrara Glassmakers, embodying the exuberance of the world-famous Murano glass, which has been made there since the 13th century. The pink roses are shown in varying degrees of flowering from tight buds to full blooms, and each was handcrafted individually before being added to the chandelier.



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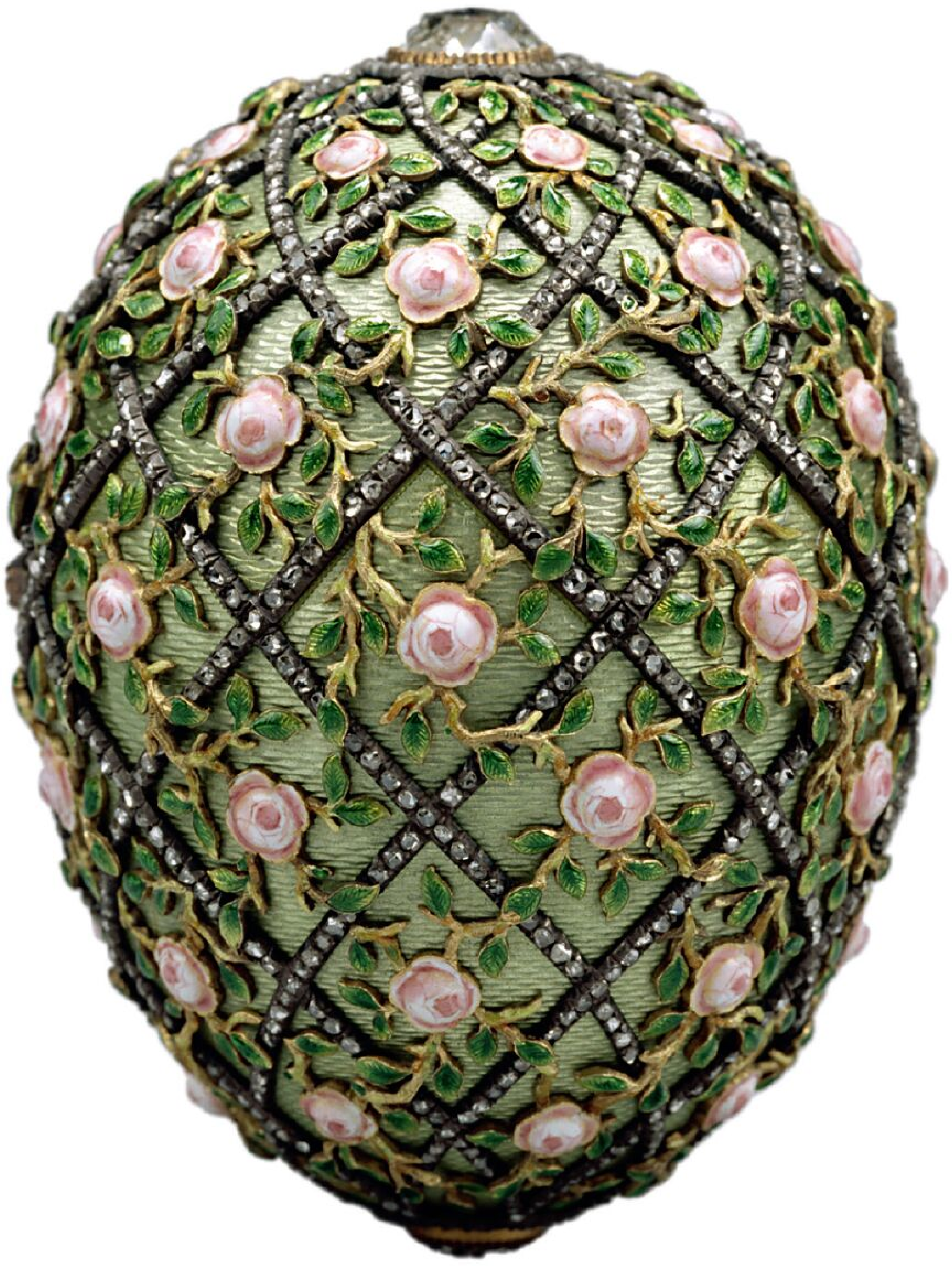
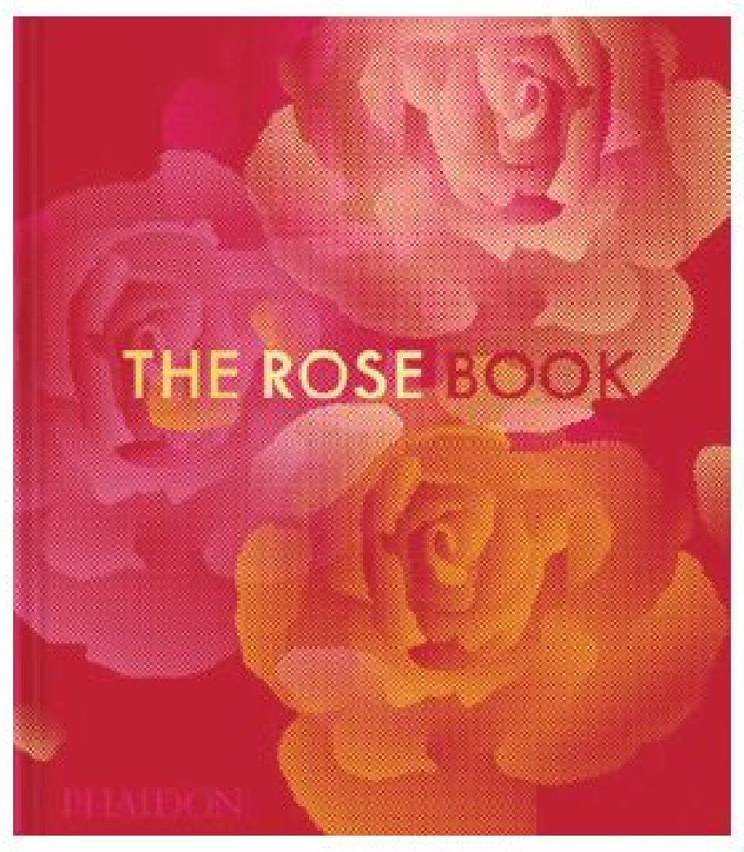


Roses, 1893
Peder Severin Krøyer
Oil on canvas

The stunning 'Alba Maxima' rosebush dominates the image of an idyllic summer's day in the cottage garden where the artist and his wife stayed in the Danish seaside town of Skagen. The white rosebush, with its exuberant blooms, obscures the house. Behind the rosebush, the artist's wife sits in a deck chair with their dog by her side. Krøyer's seat on her left is empty because he is busy painting. Known for its fragrance, 'Alba Maxima' flowers for a brief period once in the summer, and here Krøyer captures it at its peak, laden with blooms and dappled with sunlight.

Rose Trellis Egg, 1907
Fabergé
Gold, enamel, and diamonds

Tiny enamel roses in shades of light and dark pink stud this diamond-encrusted green enamel egg, which was given by Tsar Nicholas II of Russia to his wife for Easter 1907 to celebrate the birth of his heir. The tradition had started in 1885, when Alexander III, Nicholas's father, commissioned Fabergé – the Russian jewellery manufacturer – to make an Easter egg for his wife. He stipulated only that it must be unique and must contain a surprise. The *Rose Trellis Egg* stands just 7.7 centimetres tall. The surprise inside was a diamond necklace for the tsarina and a miniature ivory portrait of the couple's baby son, both now lost.



Ephemeral in nature and eternal in art, explore the rose's place in beauty and culture in *The Rose Book*, published by Phaidon. RRP $69.95.

PACE OF THE ISLANDS

On nine volcanic islands adrift in the North Atlantic, a slower, more sustainable way of travelling is thriving

Beyond their dramatic volcanic landscapes and rich biodiversity, the Azores – an autonomous region of Portugal – offer a unique blend of tradition and innovation rooted in connection and respect for nature. Here, island communities keep old traditions alive while finding new ways to care for their vulnerable environments. Visitors are invited to move at the islands' pace, exploring vibrant local markets, trekking through ancient laurel forests, or simply soaking in thermal springs.

Tourism in the Azores has continued to grow steadily, with 2024 marking a record-breaking year. In September alone, the region saw over 509,000 overnight stays – an 8.2 percent increase from the previous year. Rather than expanding unchecked, the region has responded with intention: local authorities prioritise sustainable tourism by limiting infrastructure expansion and enforcing daily caps on popular hiking trails to protect delicate habitats – ensuring the Azores retain their unique charm and ecological integrity.

Despite this growth, the Azores have kept low-impact travel at their core, welcoming visitors who are eager to tread lightly, respect the environment, and connect meaningfully with the islands' distinct culture and natural beauty. José Manuel Bolieiro, President of the Regional Government of the Azores, emphasises: 'Our goal is not just more visitors, but better visitors – those who travel with care and help us protect what makes the Azores so special'. Travellers are encouraged to approach the islands as a living environment to be respected, not a checklist to tick off. Each island has its own personality, and together, they reflect a philosophy of travel that values observation over conquest, and quality over quantity.

SÃO MIGUEL ISLAND

Hot springs, caldera lakes, and native forests

Known as "The Green Island", São Miguel is the largest and most populous of the nine. It's home to Lagoa das Sete Cidades, twin crater lakes nestled inside an extinct volcano. While the different shades of green and blue are commonly attributed to local legend (a tale of star-crossed lovers), their contrasting colours are in fact due to varying light reflections and depth levels.

The island is also, quite literally, a hotspot for geothermal activity. In Furnas, you'll find steaming fumaroles, thermal pools, and warm mineral pools. While many travellers once came to sample the traditional meat-heavy Cozido das Furnas stew, a growing number of local cafés now offer plant-based alternatives cooked in the same underground heat. You can also walk through Terra Nostra Park, where thermal water pools are surrounded by some of the oldest imported botanical collections in Europe – alongside native species, including Azorean laurel and heather.

FAIAL ISLAND

Crater landscapes and natural regeneration

Faial, often called "Ilha Azul" (Blue Island), is known for the hydrangeas that bloom during the summer months. The island is also home to the Capelinhos Volcano, whose 1957 eruption expanded Faial's landmass and forced thousands to emigrate. Today, visitors can walk the lunar-like terrain of volcanic ash and visit the subterranean interpretation centre beneath the old lighthouse, which survived the eruption.

One of Faial's most underrated experiences is a walk along the Caldeira, a 400-metre-deep crater that shelters rare endemic flora species. The area is designated as both a Special Protection Area and a Special Area of Conservation under the EU's Natura 2000 network, aimed at preserving its unique habitats and biodiversity.

PICO ISLAND

Volcanic trails and whale sanctuaries

Towering at 2,351 metres, Mount Pico is Portugal's highest peak and the central feature of Pico Island. The hike to the summit is strenuous but rewarding, offering sweeping views of neighbouring islands on clear days. More accessible are the lava trails around the coastline and the UNESCO-listed "currais" – black basalt stone walls used to shelter vineyards from wind and sea spray.

Historically a whaling hub, Pico is now a centre for marine conservation. Responsible whale watching is a major draw here, with over 20 species sighted in these deep Atlantic waters, including blue whales and beaked whales. Tour operators like Espaço Talassa, established in 1989 by former whalers who now work as marine educators, emphasise non-invasive observation practices. Serge Viallelle, co-founder of Espaço Talassa, highlights the importance of allowing marine mammals to approach vessels on their own terms, rather than pursuing them – a respectful approach that helps minimise stress on the animals and encourages more meaningful encounters.

The shift from exploitation to stewardship is reflected throughout the Azores' maritime culture. In 2018, the region established The Azores Marine Park, now part of Europe's largest marine protected area network, covering approximately 287,000 square kilometres of ocean. The park safeguards a wide range of marine habitats and species, with 30 percent of Azorean waters under strict or highly regulated protection.

FOOD, FLORA, AND CONSERVATION

For hungry travellers, the Azores offer an abundance of local produce. São Miguel's volcanic soil is rich in nutrients, making it ideal for growing everything from taro and sweet potato to passionfruit and pineapple. The Pineapple Plantation at Fajã de Baixo on São Miguel Island, while a popular stop, is also a symbol of small-scale, sustainable agriculture. Grown entirely in glass greenhouses without pesticides, these tiny, slow-growing pineapples are nothing like their supermarket counterparts.

The region's approach to conservation is also deeply rooted in community. In 2022, the Azorean Government adopted a new Regional Strategy for the Environment and Climate Change, setting a goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. Key initiatives include the restoration of native forests, expanded use of renewable energy, and measures to curb the impact of tourism on delicate ecosystems. On popular trails, particularly around crater lakes and volcanic sites, daily visitor numbers are monitored or capped to preserve biodiversity and prevent erosion.

Alonso Miguel, Regional Secretary for the Environment and Climate Change, has praised volunteer reforestation initiatives involving the local community, noting their importance in raising environmental awareness and helping restore native forests across the Azores.

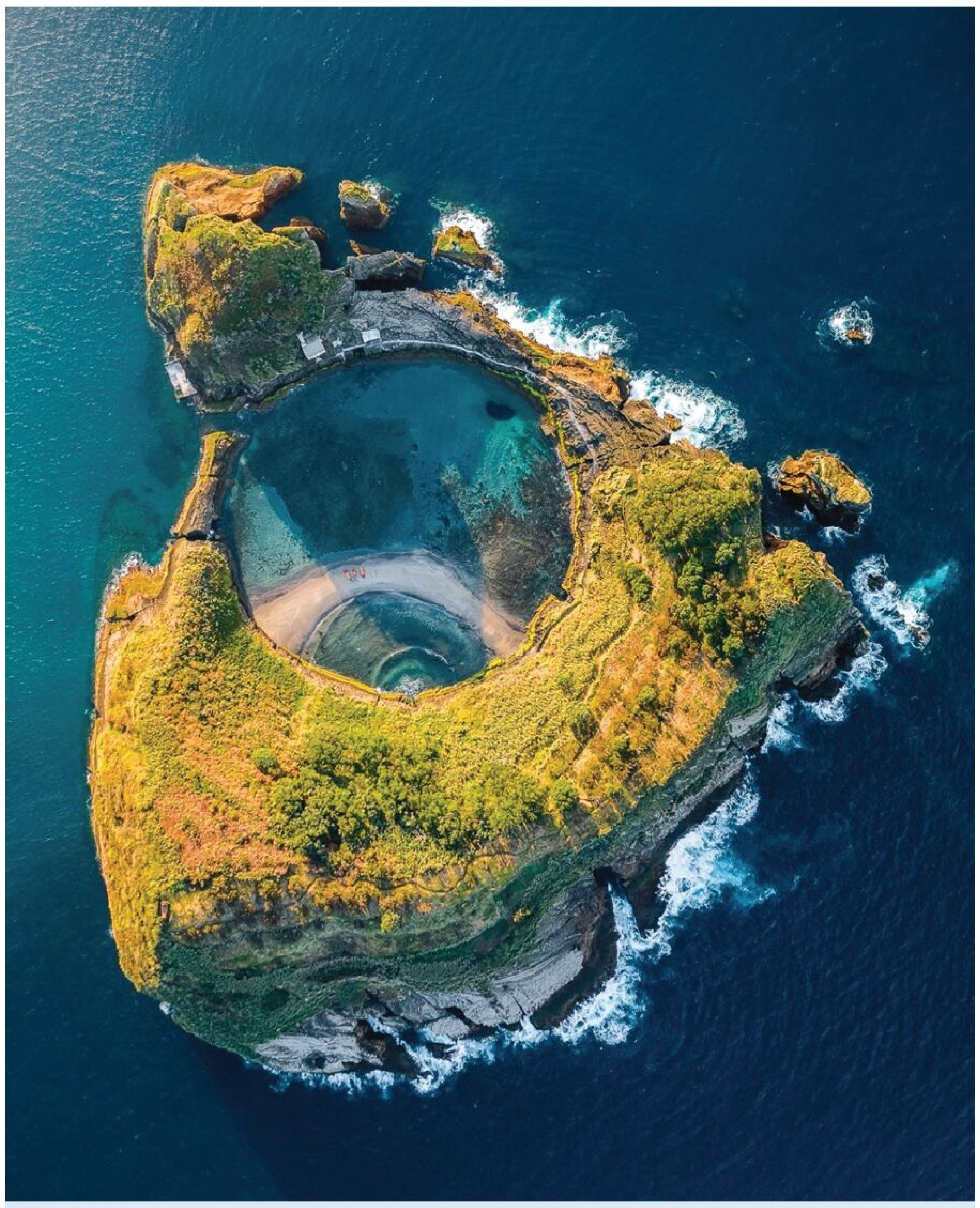
LESSONS FROM THE LAND

What sets the Azores apart isn't just their beauty – it's the sense that visitors are part of a living, working landscape. You're encouraged to tread lightly, stick to marked trails, join a reforestation project, and listen more than you photograph. As the Azorean Regional Government puts it, 'The path is travelled every day, in the harmonious alliance between people and nature to make the Azores a unique and sustainable territory!'

A WAY FORWARD

In an era of vanishing biodiversity and hypermobility, the Azores are a rare example of a region that has embraced balance – between tourism and conservation, progress and tradition. For travellers seeking depth rather than distraction, these islands offer something rarer than proximity – a model of how to tread lightly, listen closely, and travel with care.

Words: **Madison White**



SLOW DOWN, SOAK IN

The Azores invite you to explore at your own pace – island by island, breath by breath. Here's how to make your trip truly meaningful:

- **Visit multiple islands.** Each has its own ecosystem, microclimate, and culture. São Jorge Island's cliffs and cheese or Flores Island's waterfalls and flower-lined roads offer totally different experiences.
- **Choose local, low-impact tours.** Look for operators certified by Sustainable Azores or those holding the Green Key eco-label.
- **Engage with local initiatives.** From forest walks with conservation groups to community art projects, these experiences offer meaningful ways to connect.
- **Pack mindfully.** Avoid plastic, bring refillable water bottles, and consider donating to local conservation initiatives such as the Ocean Azores Foundation.
- **Travel slowly.** The Azores aren't for checking off lists. They're for lingering over the scent of the ocean, the hum of bees in volcanic gardens, and the passing fog that turns everything silver.

Breathe

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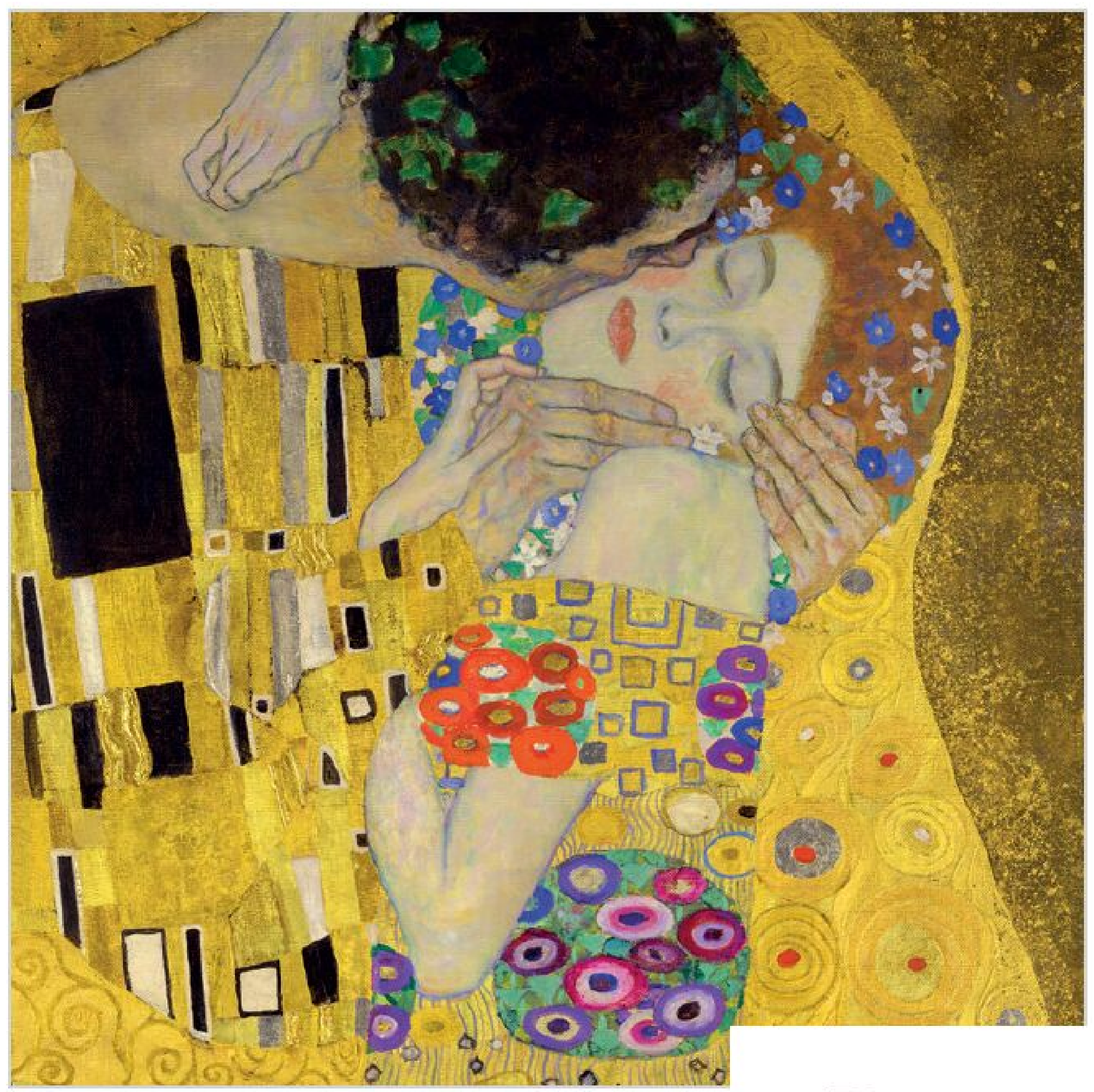
‘You are the sky.
Everything else - it’s just the weather’

PEMA CHÖDRÖN



Breathe and make time for yourself

Breathe

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